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INTRODUCTION

Warning: This story was marked mature due to darker content such as gore, death, violence, mentions of suicide, and suicidal thoughts. If this could affect you negatively, please do not continue.

After Dawn of the Clans, this story takes off on its own separate timeline. SkyClan does not exist, however, and the four clans have lived in a (fragile) harmony ever since their first establishment (until around Choice's time period, where war began to break out among the clans, mostly between ShadowClan and ThunderClan). I have created my own history for the clans that extends many, many years beyond the main character's lifetime in this story. In this timeline, Choice is closer to the very beginning of the clans, approximately 15 years after they were first founded.

Before we jump in, here's a little bit of clarification to clear up confusion about roles:

Mediators have always existed. They often travel between clans to clear up disputes (normally just minor ones; solving the issue of war is much more difficult to handle). To earn their full names, they have to gain approval from all four clans. They also need to complete basic warrior training, just so they know a decent amount of hunting and fighting skills. Sometimes, they're allowed to participate in battles if the clan is short on warriors.

Permanent queens also exist. Toms are completely welcome to become one (you'll find that the current permanent queens in the clan are both toms). Normally, permanent queens don't need any training, even if they choose to become one as an apprentice, so no mentor is necessary. (although they are still required to participate in basic warrior training).

Last but not least, I'm completely open to constructive criticism, and I'd love to hear it! I'm always looking for ways to improve :)

♥ Cover art by Nitum on Artfight/Instagram ♥

[image]

Part One

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Allegiances

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Leader:

Lakestar - A white and speckled gray she-cat with dark blue eyes

Deputy:

Goldpelt - A long-furred pale gray and white tom with a large scar on his back and amber eyes

Medicine Cats:

Chasingfur - A dark ginger tom with silver eyes

Shrikestripe - A long-furred white and gray tabby she-cat with emerald eyes

Mediators:

Hazyfall - A pale gray smoke she-cat with bronze eyes

Apprentice, Brownpaw

Goldennewt - A speckled black tom with gold eyes

Warriors:

Falcontooth - A long-furred ginger tom with cobalt eyes

Sleetpath - A gray-pink smoky she-cat with dark blue eyes and petals in her fur

Fernfur - A silver tabby tom with gold eyes (mate: Drystreak)

Honeypelt - A long-furred dorsal-striped silver and white tom with gold eyes

Apprentices:

Brownpaw - A long-furred white and brown tabby tom with emerald eyes

Queens:

Drystreak - A long-furred dorsal-striped pale ginger she-cat with copper eyes(caring for Acornkit, Cherrykit, and Strawkit)

Chaffinchflare - A light brown smoke and white tom with sage eyes(caring for adopted kits: Beetlekit and Runningkit)

Brookpaw - An unusually dappled black tom with blue eyes(training to be a permanent queen)

Pigeonpaw - A gray tabby tom with silver eyes(training to be a permanent queen)

Kits:

Beetlekit - A black and white tabby tom with yellow eyes

Runningkit - A long-furred dark ginger tabby tom with sage eyes

Acornkit - A golden brown/black mottled she-cat with sunlit-ice eyes

Cherrykit - A golden-brown tabby she-cat with copper eyes

Strawkit - A golden smoke and white tom with dark blue eyes

Elders:

N/A

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Leader:

Blazestar - A golden tabby tom with pale yellow eyes

Deputy:

Thistlebriar - A dark ginger tom with a small black spot near his muzzle and hazel eyes

Medicine Cats:

Mistywillow - A long-furred dark gray she-cat with cobalt eyes

Mediators:

Nettleblossom - A light brown tabby tom with pale yellow eyes

Ferncurl - A calico she-cat with hazel eyes

Warriors:

Nimbleleaf - A small black and white tom with amber eyes

Apprentice, Pebblepaw

Swallowflight - A brown tabby she-cat with cream dapples and yellow eyes(mate: Marigoldgaze)

Marigoldgaze - A golden and white tabby tom with amber eyes

Doeleap - A russet tom with brown eyes(mate: Applebriar)

Apprentices:

Pebblepaw - A dark gray she-cat with heather-blue eyes

Queens:

Applebriar - A tortoiseshell she-cat with hazel eyes(caring for Copperkit, Sparrowkit, Cloverkit, and Snailkit)

Kits:

Copperkit - A russet tom with hazel eyes

Sparrowkit - A brown tabby she-cat with doe-brown eyes

Cloverkit - A black she-cat with a ginger nose bridge and hazel eyes

Snailkit - A completely black tom with yellow eyes

Elders:

Foxdawn - A golden and white tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Specklelight - A ginger she-cat with orange eyes

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Leader:

Swiftstar - A silver and white tom with green eyes

Deputy:

Chervilfleck - A cream she-cat with light green eyes

Medicine Cats:

Silverbreeze - A silver-gray tom with yellow eyes

Petalsight - A white she-cat with gray splotches

Mediators:

N/A

Warriors:

Falconcloud - A very dark gray tom with blue eyes

Swoopstem - A light brown tom(mate: Mothleaf)

Eveninglily - A brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Redpaw

Creekflight - A dark brown she-cat with hazel eyes

Apprentices:

Redpaw(A long-furred ginger she-cat with green eyes)

Queens:

Mothleaf - A cream she-cat with dark green eyes(expecting kits)

Kits:

N/A

Elders:

N/A

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Leader:

Otterstar - A dark brown and white tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Deputy:

Slatesplash - A blue-gray she-cat with silver eyes

Medicine Cats:

Mottledcreek - A mottled brown and gray she-cat with a long, plumy tail

Mediators:

Sootfang - A black and white she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors:

Swiftberry - A long-furred dark gray she-cat with silver eyes(mate: Shellfall)

Sandflame - A pale ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Rapidpaw

Beechspots - A black and white tom with yellow eyes

Shellfall - A brown tabby tom with green eyes

Seedpounce - A long-furred blue-gray tom with blue eyes

Apprentice, Ripplepaw

Apprentices:

Rapidpaw - A dark gray she-cat with green eyes

Ripplepaw - A long-furred brown tabby tom with silver eyes

Queens:

N/A

Kits:

N/A

Elders:

Covelight - A small blue-gray she-cat

Ivystream - A gray tom with white splotches

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〈 GALLERY 〉

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I've seen multiple people add a lil gallery in their story, so why not as well? :D

All pictures were found on Pinterest.

Photos are not accurate to their designs.

In the future, I'll replace the images with drawings of their actual designs. For now, here are pictures!

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LEADER

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LAKESTAR

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DEPUTY

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GOLDPELT

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MEDICINE CATS

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CHASINGFUR

[image]

SHRIKESTRIPE

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MEDIATORS

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HAZYFALL

[image]

GOLDENNEWT

[image]

BROWNPAW

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WARRIORS

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FALCONTOOTH

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FERNFUR

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SLEETPATH

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HONEYPELT

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QUEENS

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CHAFFINCHFLARE

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DRYSTREAK

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BROOKPAW

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PIGEONPAW

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BEETLEKIT

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RUNNINGKIT

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ACORNKIT

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CHERRYKIT

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STRAWKIT

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Prologue

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THERE WILL BE IMAGES SUCH AS THE ONES ABOVE WHICH REPRESENT THE SEASON/WEATHER IN THAT CHAPTER!

★彡[THIS IDEA WAS NOT CREATED BY ME]彡★

credits to

**images are not owned by me and were found on pinterest/google*

**The template was found on google, I'm not sure who the original owner is*

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"I hail you by your new name, Lakestar. Your old life is no more. You have now received the nine lives of a leader, and StarClan grants you the guardianship of ShadowClan. Defend it well; care for young and old; honor your ancestors and the traditions of the warrior code; live each life with pride and dignity."

As soon as Goldstar finished his speech, the countless spirits surrounding the ghostly meadow erupted into cheers, singing the name, "Lakestar! Lakestar! Lakestar!"

The new name blossomed in her mind. *Lakestar.*

Eventually, the cheering died away. Lakestar felt her vision twisting, a smoky black descending over the once starry landscape. It spun dizzily in her eyes, her paws grasping empty air. After a long moment of a confusing spiral of darkness, her vision returned.

StarClan's lands were now replaced with a vast forest of dark, twisted elm trees that stretched endlessly into the abyss. Their large canopies of dead branches clattered against each other, blocking the stretch of night sky above. Yet, as she peered through them, she could only see a void of darkness. Not a single dot of light pricked its shadows. And, in the atmosphere, she could sense a twisting, gut-wrenching form of hatred lingering in the air.

The Dark Forest.

She dug her claws into the ground, an unexpected flash of fury scouring her like a strike of lightning.

"How dare you bring me here again!" Lakestar yowled into the forest. "How many times do I have to say it? *I'm done!*"

"No need to get your tail in such a twist," came a mocking laugh.

She stiffened as a familiar brown and cream pelt slipped out from behind a short, scorched-looking elm tree.

Lakestar bared her fangs.

"What do you want, Russettalon? I have a clan to take care of. A *life*. Don't drag me into your stupidity again!"

Russettalon blinked innocently. His sage green eyes were a flowering meadow, its lush grasses indicating a sign of growth and happiness.

She gritted her teeth. His show of innocence was more than just familiar. It was a trick to gain the trust of others.

She wouldn't let herself fall for that again.

"I won't do anything to bother you at all. I'm just here to kindly give a message."

"That's what StarClan cats do, not Dark Forest cats," she growled, curling her lip. "Just give up, Russettalon. Your spirit belongs here, not with the living clans anymore."

A smirk appeared on Russettalon's dim face.

"Oh no, I'm so angry because she doesn't want to listen to my message!" He exclaimed, his voice higher-pitched as he faked a tone of despair. "Now she's going to leave the Dark Forest and wake up, because she certainly can, and go back to the living clans! What ever will I do?!"

Lakestar immediately recognized the sarcasm, but she attempted anyway. She squeezed her eyes shut, focusing intently on the thought of the living clans. It wavered clearly in her mind, yet stayed as just a thought. There was no way to reach it.

She was *trapped* in the Dark Forest.

"Get me out of this place. Now," Lakestar demanded, opening her eyes and glaring directly into his smug face.

"Once you listen to my message," he said sweetly.

She let out a hiss of frustration.

"Fine! Just tell me! But your words mean *nothing* to me. I trust no Dark Forest cat, *especially* you."

He shrugged, yet a hint of a grin had appeared on his face.

"Alright then."

He paused for a long moment to clean an unruly piece of fur on his shoulder, which Lakestar found strange that his pelt still needed to be groomed now that he was dead. And, it seemed even stranger that a *Dark Forest* cat would even bother taking care of their pelt. She assumed that for this instance it was to waste her time.

Finally, after an excruciatingly long moment, he finished his task, looking up to meet her with his sage eyes.

"You see, the Clans don't stay the same forever. Cats may be more welcoming to twisted paths than those before."

Russettalon locked her into an intense stare.

"Darkness is rising. Rules are changing."

Lakestar shifted uncomfortably under his unsettling gaze.

"Are you trying to say that the Dark Forest will get stronger?"

Russettalon shrugged.

"Interpret it how you want. Just know that your nice little clanmates won't stay innocent for long."

Lakestar rose to her paws, bushing out her pelt. She glared at the dark warrior, a low growl rumbling deep in her chest.

"Nice try threatening me on my first day as a leader. You don't have me fooled, Russettalon. I know what you are trying to do. Infect my mind with worries to cloud my judgment, so I turn out to be a terrible leader. I'm not stupid."

He smirked.

"Suit yourself. But eventually, you'll find out how ignorant *you* were for not listening to my warning."

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Chapter One

[image]

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"I'm going to get there first!"

Acornkit's squeal ripped through the air as she raced across the camp, the piercing sunlight of Greenleaf setting her pelt ablaze. Cherrykit, her sister, was only several tail-lengths ahead of her, her paws pattering on the ground as she fought to reach the prey pile first.

Behind her, Acornkit could feel the hot breath of her brother, Strawkit, on her tail. She put on a little burst of speed to prevent him from outrunning her, tiny lungs fighting to keep up with her legs.

After several moments, however, she began to grow exhausted. She slowed, gasping for breath, as Cherrykit reached the towering pile of prey. At that moment, Strawkit flew past her, barging directly into Cherrykit and sending the golden-brown she-kit tumbling to the ground.

Strawkit raised his stubby tail.

"I win!" He declared, eyes shining with triumph.

Cherrykit glared at him.

"Did not! You cheated! I was already there!"

Acornkit quickly hurried over the last remaining strides to the fresh-kill pile, just before the squabble would break out into a full-fledged argument. Between one cross sibling and another smug one, it certainly wouldn't end well.

She wedged herself between them, causing Cherrykit to let out a

hiss of annoyance and muttering an inaudible sentence under her breath, something along the lines of *'unfair*' and *'mouse-brain*'. When Acornkit gave her a stern glare, one that mimicked the look that their mother often gave the three of them when they were caught in mischief, Cherrykit rolled her eyes and stomped away to nose through the fresh-kill pile. However, she didn't walk away without letting out a pointed huff at Strawkit.

"You two can be greedy furballs and eat all of the prey for yourselves. *I'm* going to find something for Mom," Strawkit proclaimed, ignoring Cherrykit's annoyance and strutting over to the pile of prey which loomed over him, his chest puffed out and his chin lifted.

"Okay, show-off," Cherrykit huffed, clearly still seething with indignation.

"'*Greedy furball?*' I'll show you who's a greedy furball when *I* bring a piece of prey to Dad," Acornkit snapped at him, her eyes narrowed.

"Not if I get prey first!" Strawkit was hardly able to finish his sentence as he lunged to the fresh-kill pile.

Acornkit let out a squeal and rushed after him, pushing her hind legs off the ground before sailing into him. He let out a yelp of surprise as her front paws hit his shoulders, the impact causing him to collapse to the ground. She planted her paws firmly into him to prevent him from escaping her grasp. But her grip loosened a little as she saw Cherrykit creep towards the fresh-kill pile from the corner of her eye.

A playful growl reverberated in the air. Barely a heartbeat later, Strawkit had freed himself from her grapple and had lunged towards her with outstretched paws. She squealed in shock as he knocked into her, sending her staggering to the ground. Just before she could fall face-first into the dirt, she twisted midair and snatched desperately at his fur with needle-sharp claws. His playful growls turned into a snarl of pain as she clung on, almost ripping the fur out of his coat.

"*Ow*! Get *off*!" Strawkit yelped, shaking his pelt madly in an attempt

to free himself from her claws.

She was barely able to cling on for a moment longer until she broke free, falling to the camp floor with an "*Ooof*."

"I think I just lost half my pelt from that," Strawkit complained, grumbling under his breath as he licked the area where her claws had yanked the delicate kitten fluff.

Acornkit had opened her jaws to say something when a sudden flash of golden-brown flared at the edge of her vision. As she quickly looked to the side to pinpoint the object, she suddenly noticed that Cherrykit was haring to the Nursery, a lizard dangling from her jaws. Realization set in when she saw that the tabby she-kit was headed directly for her mother, Drystreak.

"Hey! She can't do that! *We* were going to bring prey to Mom!" Acornkit yowled, glaring at the back of her sister's pelt.

"You said you were going to bring something for Dad!" Strawkit barely paused to argue before racing after Cherrykit, his small tail waving wildly as he ran. Acornkit leaped to her paws and quickly darted after him, her small paws pattering on the ground.

Cherrykit had slowed, unaware of her two littermates closing in on her. Then, about a tail-length before he reached her, Strawkit pushed off from the ground, pouncing for the tabby. The she-kit barely had time to look over her shoulder before the golden tomkit crashed into her, sending them tumbling into a shrieking ball of fluff.

Acornkit skidded to a halt close to the fighting littermates, taking the chance to catch her breath. That was when she noticed the lizard Cherrykit had previously held in her jaws now lying on the ground. Chest puffing out with triumph, she quickly hurried forward and grasped it in her mouth.

Now it's for me to give Mom!

Acornkit strode to the nursery, her chin lifted as the lizard swung in her jaws. It didn't take long for her to find the familiar pale ginger

pelt of her mother, Drystreak. She was cleaning herself in front of the entrance, her plumed tail wrapped around her neatly. Acornkit glanced down at her own pelt, realizing that it was dusty with dirt and flecked with bits of leaves and twigs. Wishing for her coat to look just as clean and shiny as her mother's, she quickly began to groom it thoroughly, after dropping her lizard. Once she was certain that it seemed presentable, she picked up the prey and continued.

It took a moment for Drystreak to notice the approaching kit. And when she did, her tail immediately began to flick crossly.

"Why don't you go bother Hazyfall or whatever? I'm in the middle of something," she grumbled.

Acornkit felt her heart sink.

"I just thought you wanted this lizard," she mewed quietly, eyes as round as an owl's as she dropped it at her mother's paws.

Drystreak sighed, looking conflicted.

After a long moment, she gave Acornkit a quick lick on the ears before dragging the lizard closer and craning her neck to wolf it down.

Acornkit purred loudly. She knew her mother was often occupied at times and was usually too stressed out to be with her and her littermates, but in those few instances when she accepted a gift or praised her, it felt as if she could grow wings and fly.

Her attention shifted away from her mother as bickering voices drew closer. Strawkit and Cherrykit had broken apart, their pelts spiky and marred with knots from their chaotic play-fight. Cherrykit had spotted her and was now bounding over to her, tail lashing angrily.

"*I* was going to bring that to Mom!" She hissed, her claws scrabbling on the ground.

"You were too busy fighting Strawkit and left the lizard, and I didn't want it to go to waste. Plus, you can always bring something for

Dad," Acornkit offered quickly, hoping to pacify her before a major hissy-fit took place.

"That's not even fair, I was—"

"*Enough*. Or I'll have you sleeping in your own nest for the rest of the five moons," Drystreak scolded, her voice as harsh as the sun on the hottest day of Greenleaf, and her copper glare impossible to meet.

Under their mother's piercing look, Cherrykit quickly backed off, lowering her head and mumbling a small apology. But as she turned and trudged off, Acornkit could barely make out the words, "Well, Strawkit kicks me all the time while I'm trying to sleep, so I don't even care."

"StarClan will have to take care of this if she doesn't grow out of it," Drystreak muttered. Acornkit decided she wasn't meant to hear this from how low her voice had been, yet she still silently wondered what it meant, tilting her head as she watched the retreating pelt of Cherrykit.

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author's note(7/20/2025)

changed up the chapter a bit! Comments are from the older version.

Chapter Two

[image]

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Pale dawn light was gradually spreading across the sky, indicating that the dawn patrol would be sent out any moment now. As the sun's first rays warmed her pelt, Acornkit crept across the camp floor, keeping low. She let her paws fall across the ground lightly, careful not to make too much noise. She also kept an observant eye ahead of her, making sure none of her clanmates were nearby.

She was two moons old now, and the last of Greenleaf was beginning to fade. Although ShadowClan did not have the oak trees which turned into pretty crimson hues and shed leaves during Leaf-fall like ThunderClan did, she could still taste a hint of sweetness in the wind, as well as the scent of rotting and dying plants pricking the air. Her father, Fernfur, had told her that by the time she was an apprentice, Leaf-bare would be upon them, and she would have to work twice as hard to feed the clan. Although the thought was overwhelming, the undeniable loyalty to her clanmates drove a determination in her heart.

But also, now that the season was changing and she was becoming a moon older, two new apprentices had been made. Beetlekit and Runningkit, the older kits in the nursery whom Acornkit had barely ever spoken to, were now Beetlepaw and Runningpaw. Beetlepaw's mentor was Chaffinchflare, while Runningpaw's mentor was Lakestar.

Acornkit had taken an interest in watching the brand-new apprentices battle train. Their mentors started them off early in the morning, just before dawn patrol was sent out. She hoped that by the time she was an apprentice, she would already know an impressive number of battle moves and techniques, just from her observations.

She tucked herself in the shelter of a fern toward the edge of the camp. Peering out, she watched for any signs of Beetlepaw and Runningpaw, her icy hazel-blue gaze scanning the dawn-lit clearing. Yet the camp remained empty.

As she raked her claws across the ground, tail flicking absently, she suddenly heard quiet voices drift across the camp. She gazed out of the fern, becoming motionless as she watched.

Beetlepaw and Runningpaw were both outside the apprentice's den, yawning and blinking blearily. She could see Chaffinchflare, his back only visible as he wasn't facing her, and Lakestar, who was seated next to him.

She stretched her ears, listening intently as the small group of cats conversed before beginning their training.

"We shouldn't have to drag you out of your nests every morning." Lakestar's scolding voice reached her ears as the speckled she-cat berated the two apprentices. "When you're a warrior, you won't have any cat to wake you for patrols."

Runningpaw nodded quickly with a wide, sage-green gaze, while Beetlepaw dipped his head respectfully, letting out a calm "Yes ma'am."

"They've only just become apprentices. It will take time for them to adjust to waking up this early," Chaffinchflare murmured, clearly trying to smooth things over. Acornkit remembered that the old tom had fostered both the apprentices as kits, standing as their only parental figure ever since the clan had adopted them. She found it odd seeing the stern tom acting this gently, but she supposed it was because he was training one of his kits.

Beetlepaw blinked up affectionately at his father before glancing over at Lakestar.

"We'll make sure to do it on our own so you don't have to anymore," he promised, before giving his fluffy brother a playful elbow. "Right, Runningpaw?"

The ginger tom responded with a nervous grin.

Eventually, the group of cats departed, padding toward the stream that divided the camp from the training grounds. A giant, bare pine tree was sprawled over it, serving as a bridge to safely cross when water levels rose during heavy rainfall.

Acornkit crept after them, waiting impatiently for them to cross the stream. Once they did, and they had vanished from her field of vision, she pulled herself onto the tree, grunting with the effort. Although the water levels were at their lowest, her mother would know by her soaking pelt that she had been crossing the stream. The tree-bridge would be her safest option.

Her tail waved wildly as she heaved herself up before finally, she reached the top, digging her claws in to steady herself.

A light breeze brushed past her, making her shiver slightly. After a moment of hesitation, she forced herself to creep forward, keeping her eyes trained ahead and not on the stream below her. Its shallow waters certainly wouldn't harm her if she fell in, yet from her perspective, it seemed as if it stretched below endlessly.

Finally, after several cautious steps forward, she reached the end of the trunk. Ears pricked and alert, Acornkit gave a glance around before scrambling down onto the short tussocks of grass below.

Her relief was only short-lived. Praying to StarClan that she hadn't been spotted, she flung herself into the cover of a nearby cedar grove, ducking under some surrounding undergrowth.

If I get caught, I'll just say that I thought the training grounds were a part of camp, she decided.

Acornkit crept to the edge of the grove, watching with a wide gaze.

Beetlepaw had barely managed to duck a blow from Runningpaw, his paw sailing over the tips of his ears. He reacted quickly, springing onto Runningpaw's back and pushing him to the ground.

"Drop-and-roll, Runningpaw!" Lakestar yowled.

Acornkit watched intently, holding her breath.

The ginger tom's ears twitched, obviously hearing his mentor. All of a sudden, he fell to the ground, just before twisting beneath Beetlepaw and battering his now exposed belly with a series of blows.

Beetlepaw quickly leaped away after a short struggle. Acornkit gaped with astonishment as he turned and sent Runningpaw a sprawling kick with his hind legs. She knew it was just training and it wasn't painful, yet she couldn't bear to imagine how much that could hurt in a real battle.

Runningpaw quickly scrambled to his paws, backing away a little from Beetlepaw. They slowly began to circle each other, eyes firmly fixed on one another.

As Beetlepaw padded by Chaffinchflare, his mentor leaned forward and muttered something in his ear. Beetlepaw nodded before continuing to circle the ginger apprentice, while Acornkit was left silently wondering what his mentor had said to the black and white tom.

Then, Acornkit noticed Beetlepaw's gaze flicker to Runningpaw's paws. The ginger tom quickly backed away, as if expecting Beetlepaw to go for his feet. But instead, Beetlepaw dove to the side and lunged at him, swiping him with a quick blow to the head.

Runningpaw quickly twisted around to face him and shot a clumsy swipe at his legs, attempting to knock him to the ground. It was unsuccessful, but the distraction had caused Beetlepelt to trip on a twig and stumble to the ground.

"That's enough for this morning," came the rumbling voice of Chaffinchflare.

Lakestar gave the apprentices each a serious glance as soon as they had both picked themselves up. "Although I am impressed with how much you both have learned with such little training, plenty of work is still needed. Runningpaw, you could make your strikes a little less clumsy. Beetlepaw, work on dodging quicker. A battle can

be surprising, yes, but you must always be prepared."

Both the apprentices nodded, murmuring 'okay,' although Acornkit spotted Beetlepaw mutter something into Runningpaw's ear, almost as if he were complaining.

Realizing that they were now beginning to head back, she quickly lowered herself deeper into the undergrowth, keeping as still as possible. Luckily, her mottled fur helped her camouflage more efficiently, with the darker patches along her fur blending into the swamping shadows of the woods around her, while the creeping patches of sunlight that poked through the network of pine needles above perfectly matched the lighter brindle on her pelt.

As they headed past where Acornkit was hiding, speaking in low murmurs, she noticed that Beetlepaw had fallen behind the others. A jolt of fear flashed through her.

Beetlepaw's jaws were gaped open to scent the air, eyes flashing with suspicion.

She slowly began to back up, her heart racing. She was more than convinced that Beetlepaw could sense that she was there. The suspicion was sealed when her paw made contact with a twig, its splintery crack seeming to send everything into a deafening silence.

"Come on out, Acornkit," Beetlepaw called.

With a sigh, she scrambled out from the undergrowth, pushing through the ferns. Head and tail drooping, she stopped in front of Beetlepaw and refused to meet his gaze, staring down at her paws.

"Kits are not supposed to be out of camp," he reminded her gently. "How'd you even cross the bridge without falling into the stream?"

Acornkit finally looked up.

"I just walked across it," she said pointedly, feeling a slight hint of pride. She puffed out her chest. "I wanted to watch you battle train, so when I'm an apprentice, I'll know everything!"

Beetlepaw's whiskers twitched.

Acornkit wrinkled her nose. Did he think it was funny? She had snuck out all this way, and spent the time carefully watching him battle train! If anything, he had to be impressed.

"Hurry up, Beetlepaw! What's taking you so long?" Runningpaw yowled from up ahead. Acornkit quickly ducked behind Beetlepaw when the ginger tom glanced over his shoulder.

Beetlepaw waved his tail at his sibling.

"I'll be there in a second!" He called.

Acornkit widened her eyes at the tom, heart beginning to race.

"You're not going to tell on me, are you? Are you going to tell Drystreak? Or Fernfur? Please don't!"

"I won't tell," Beetlepaw promised. "But don't try crossing the stream on your own anymore, okay?"

Acornkit nodded quickly.

"Then could you teach me a few battle moves?" She mewed hopefully. "Pleeeaseee?"

Beetlepaw narrowed his eyes.

"You're only two moons. Maybe wait until you're about four or five. Or even better, six! Now, hurry up before you get caught."

"Okay," she said with a sigh of disappointment.

Acornkit trailed after Beetlepaw in the direction of the camp, silently wishing that she didn't have to wait an entire four moons.

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author's note(7/20/2025)

did some more editing! lengthened the chapter slightly.

Chapter Three

[image]

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"My paws are bigger! Mine are definitely bigger!" Strawkit squealed, giving Acornkit a whack on the face with his wildly waving tail.

"That just means you'll be more clumsy in battle because your paws are so big and heavy," Acornkit shot back, glaring at her brother and batting away his tail.

Strawkit ignored her.

"I'm going to be just like Fernfur when I grow up! Or even better, Goldpelt! He's the deputy." He leaned forward, his voice turning to a whisper. "But maybe Fernfur is better than Goldpelt because Goldpelt has a big nasty scar on his back. I wouldn't want that."

Acornkit raked her claws across the ground restlessly.

"But I think scars look kind of cool. What if I got a big one on my shoulder from this super dangerous battle I won? Or wait, what about a torn ear? I would look so scary!"

"I want a scar too!" Cherrykit chimed in, bounding away from Drystreak and joining the siblings, her red-brown fur shining neatly, indicating that Drystreak had just cleaned her.

"Kits! Now is not the time to be worrying about scars. You have an apprentice ceremony to get ready for!"

The familiar, stern voice was Fernfur, their father. His short silver coat was sleek, gleaming in the pale Leaf-bare sunlight. It appeared that he wanted to look just as clean as if he was having a ceremony himself today.

Four moons had gone by quickly, although it was packed with

many events. Sickness had arrived early, causing a senior warrior, Falcontooth, to pass away from Greencough. Another warrior, Sleetpath, was currently sick in the medicine den with Yellowcough.

However, the four moons were not just tragedies. Beetlepaw had been made a warrior early and was now known as Beetlepelt. Pigeonpaw and Brookpaw, two apprentices training to be permanent queens, had earned their full names and were now Pigeonsilk and Brookdaisy. Along with that, Brownpaw, who was training to be a mediator, had become Brownsnout.

"Why do we have to look super clean?" Strawkit complained. "It's a ceremony, no one is going to remember!"

Fernfur held a sharp gaze with Strawkit.

"Cats will remember if you look like you just walked out of a badger den for your ceremony! Now come here!"

"Nooooo!" Strawkit squealed, hiding behind Acornkit. "My pelt looks fine!"

All of a sudden, a loud yowl rang across the camp.

"Let all cats old enough to lurk in the shadows gather around Shade Rock for a clan meeting!"

"That's Lakestar!" Cherrykit mewed, voice high-pitched with awe. "Our ceremony is happening right now!"

Drystreak rushed over, her gaze lit with panic. She sprang for the nearest kit, Cherrykit, and began to clean her pelt fiercely, completely ignoring the fact that she had already groomed her pelt several moments ago. Cherrykit let out a wail of protest, wriggling away from Drystreak.

Fernfur sighed, resting his tail on Drystreak's shoulder.

"They'll be fine," he murmured. "What's more important is the fact that this is a very special day for them. All of us. We get to see our kits grow up."

Drytreak's eyes were bright with emotion, although she gave a slight nod, her chest heaving a weary sigh.

By the time they padded to the center of the clearing, the clan seemed to have already gathered. Lakestar was seated on the top of Shade Rock, her white-gray speckled pelt blending in with the frosty hues of Leaf-bare, and eyes shining with the light of Greenleaf sunshine. Sitting on the cluster of boulders a little below her was Goldpelt, the deputy. Around the boulders were Shrikestripe and Chasingfur, seated closely. The mediators sat in their little group, which included Goldennewt, Hazyfall, and Brownsnout. Finally, Honeypelt and Chaffinchflare were seated closely together, while Sleetpath poked her head out of the medicine den, eyes weary with sickness.

The three kits hurried over to the gathered cats, Fernfur and Drystreak trailing after them. Acornkit's heart was racing with a mixture of nervousness and excitement, and she felt her limbs trembling slightly.

Once the family was all settled, Lakestar rose to her paws, clearing her throat to address the clan.

"Today is a very important day. Three young cats have reached the age of six moons, and are ready to become apprentices."

Lakestar gave a slight nod. Realizing it was a cue to step forward, she gave her siblings a slight nudge and the three of them padded up closer to the boulders.

"Cherrykit, Strawkit, and Acornkit, you have all reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior names, you will now be known as Cherrypaw, Strawpaw, and Acornpaw."

She pricked her ears, paws twitching with excitement. She ran her new name in her mind. *Acornpaw. Acornpaw.*

The leader's gaze focused on Cherrypaw.

"Cherrypaw, your mentor will be Goldpelt. He has proven to be an

excellent deputy and warrior, and I know he will pass down all that he knows to you."

"Oh no, I bet he's going to make me do tick duty as soon as this meeting is over," Cherrypaw whispered in Acornpaw's ear, casting one quick uncertain glance at the deputy before bounding over to touch noses with him.

"Strawpaw," Lakestar called. "Your mentor will be Chaffinchflare. Although he has already mentored recently, I believe he is worthy of another. He has many moons of wisdom ready to pass down to you."

Strawpaw, although his gaze was swelling with confidence, there was a hint of nervousness in his step as he padded over to the base of Shade Rock, where Chaffinchflare met him. The warrior craned his neck to touch his nose with Strawpaw.

Then, Lakestar's eyes turned to Acornpaw. Immediately, her anxiety swelled up again, and she felt her paws tremble slightly.

"Acornpaw, your mentor will be Beetlepelt. Although he is very young, I trust his abilities and I believe he is more than ready for an apprentice of his own."

Her eyes rounded with astonishment. He was the one she had least expected to be her mentor. But there she was, standing in the middle of the clearing as Beetlepelt padded over to touch noses, surprised murmurs filling the air.

"Will we do battle training now that I'm an apprentice?" Acornpaw whispered, eyes round and hopeful.

Beetlepelt let out a soft purr before shaking his head.

"Perhaps another time. We'll be exploring the territory today."

She beamed at the idea of venturing through and learning about ShadowClan territory as they both hurried back into the crowd. Battle training could wait. Taking a tour of ShadowClan land was much more important.

Once the meeting was over, they padded away from the Shade Rock, heading out into the clearing. A moment later, both her littermates bounded over.

"I can't believe Cherrypaw got the deputy," Strawpaw complained, voice laced with envy as he swept his gaze over the enthusiastic tabby.

"I can't believe it either," Cherrypaw agreed, completely oblivious to her brother's jealousy. She instead gazed at Acornpaw through anxious copper eyes, leaning forward slightly and lowering her voice to a whisper.

"Do you think Lakestar is trying to set you up for failure?" She murmured.

Acornpaw's brow furrowed in confusion.

"What do you mean?" She mewed, eyes rounding slightly.

"She gave you the youngest, most inexperienced warrior in the clan," Cherrypaw replied. "Plus, he became a warrior early."

Acornpaw gazed over to where Lakestar was seated, grooming herself in a small pool of sunshine. She sank into thought. Did Lakestar hold some sort of grudge against her?

Acornpaw shook her head. *That can't be right. I haven't done anything to upset her.*

"I don't think she would single me out like that," Acornpaw said finally, hoping her words were true. "It wouldn't make any sense."

When she still noticed a prick of concern mingled in Cherrypaw's face, she pressed her muzzle against her cheek, rumbling a soft purr.

Cherrypaw relaxed a little at the gesture, letting out a purr in return.

Then, she pulled away, locking Acornpaw in a fierce copper gaze.

"But if she *dares* to try to ruffle your fur in any way..." Cherrypaw bared her fangs. "She'll have to deal with *me*."

Acornpaw rested her tail on Cherrypaw's shoulder in another attempt to calm her. "It's okay, Cherrypaw. She's the leader. I doubt she would waste her time trying to bother some apprentice."

Cherrypaw sighed.

"You're right...just tell me if I need to do anything for you, alright?"

Acornpaw nodded, a purr rising in her chest once more.

I'm glad that she's my sister.

The littermates pulled away as Goldpelt and Chaffinchflare padded over to the group. Beetlepelt dipped his head respectfully to the older warriors.

"Beetlepelt. Chaffinchflare and I have decided to take our apprentices to take a tour of ShadowClan land. Would you like to join us?" Goldpelt meowed. The deputy shot a glance at Acornpaw. "And I'm sure your apprentice would enjoy exploring with her siblings."

"Exactly what I was planning on doing. Just a second ago," Beetlepelt said quickly.

"Great. Let's go," Goldpelt said, already padding toward the entrance.

As the group headed off to the camp entrance, the new apprentices swapped enthusiastic glances.

"I can't wait to see the WindClan border," Strawpaw whispered, flexing his claws.

"Why are you whispering?" Cherrypaw said loudly, causing a raven that had been resting in a tree nearby to shoot up, letting out a cry of alarm.

Chaffinchflare glanced over his shoulder, shooting a sharp glance at

Cherrypaw.

"*Hush*," he scolded. "I'm sure the hunting patrols this evening will appreciate your yowling."

"Sorry," Cherrypaw muttered, hanging her head.

Strawpaw leaned toward Acornpaw slightly.

"*That's* why," he muttered in her ear. "As soon as the meeting he gave me a beforehand warning that if I decide to be a chatty apprentice, he'll think I'm unfit to be a warrior."

Acornpaw frowned.

"That's a little harsh," she whispered.

"Yeah. Can we get a mentor swap?"

Acornpaw rolled her eyes.

"Sure, because Lakestar would *definitely* allow that."

Eventually, they fell into the silence, with the apprentices observing the many surroundings. Acornpaw felt a little overwhelmed with the countless pines blurring past her. She didn't understand how it would be possible to memorize the *entire* territory. From every direction, there seemed to be an endless and vast forest of pine trees.

Soon, their quicker stride slowed as their mentors padded along at a comfortable pace, while the apprentices followed behind quietly, Chaffinchflare engaging them with stories of ShadowClan's land.

"Although the pines and sparse undergrowth offered *some* places to hide for those first ShadowClanners, they soon realized that it was still very difficult to hunt," the senior warrior was saying.

"But it *had* to have been better than hunting on the moor, right?" Cherrypaw asked quickly after he paused.

"Of course," he said, much more kindly than the last time when he

had snapped at her for being too loud. "But you see, those early ShadowClanners still had trouble trying to catch prey. Leaf-bare was growing closer, and bellies were growing empty. So they had to come up with a technique to catch prey."

Chaffinchflare indicated to the long shadows cast by the pine trees with his tail.

"They used the shadows to their advantage. These cats found a way to hide in the shadows, using a certain crouching technique that easily hid them from unsuspecting prey. And soon enough, they became the stealthiest in all the clans, earning the name *Shadow*Clan."

Goldpelt, who had been silent the entire time as he led them through the territory, glanced back at them.

"Eventually, we will have your first hunting practice so we can teach you these hunting crouches."

"Isn't this so cool?!" Cherrypaw whispered, glancing at Acornpaw and Strawpaw. "ShadowClan is the coolest clan ever! We're so stealthy and we have so many secrets and-"

Suddenly, the trees began to thin before a small clearing opened up. At the end of the clearing, a strange twisting black path ran through, bordering a large oak forest. Acornpaw wrinkled her nose as an acrid taste entered her mouth.

"What *is* that?" Cherrypaw gasped, a look of pure disgust written on her face.

"The Thunderpath," Chaffinchflare answered.

Goldpelt raised his tail as a signal to halt, stopping several tail-lengths away from the Thunderpath. Acornpaw gazed curiously past him, observing the unusual stretch of stone.

All of a sudden, a loud roaring filled her ears. She let out a gasp, pressing herself close to Cherrypaw as a strange flash of metallic color shot past them, vanishing into the distance and leaving a sharp taste lingering in the air.

"What was that?" Strawpaw asked shakily, blue eyes as round as an owl's.

"A monster. Clan cats stay away from them, at all costs. If you had been standing on the Thunderpath during that time, well..." Goldpelt trailed off. "It won't stop."

Chaffinchflare nodded along gravely.

"Twolegs are responsible for making this Thunderpath. Countless seasons ago, long before I was born, Twolegs constructed it directly on the border between ShadowClan and ThunderClan."

"So *that's* ThunderClan's territory?" Cherrypaw asked, her voice high-pitched with awe as she stared at the towering oak forest across the Thunderpath.

"Precisely," Goldpelt answered.

"Perhaps it's a good thing the Thunderpath was built," Beetlepelt mused, shocking Acornpaw out of her thoughts. She had barely heard her mentor utter a word the entire time. "They're less likely to cross into our territory and try to steal our prey."

There was a long moment of silence before Goldpelt nodded slightly.

"You may be right. Anyway, it's time we show the apprentices one of our most closely guarded ShadowClan secrets."

Acornpaw noticed how Cherrypaw's ears immediately pricked up.

"Come along now," said Goldpelt.

He padded alongside the Thunderpath where several bushes dotted its edges. Acornpaw stuck close to Strawpaw's side, nervously shooting glances at the acrid path. But it stayed silent, not a single Monster breaking the stillness.

Eventually, Goldpelt paused, nosing through several bushes. Then, much to her shock, he slipped through, vanishing through the thick leaves. Right next to the Thunderpath.

"Where in StarClan did he go?" Acornpaw mewed, eyes impossibly big and round.

"Follow me." Goldpelt's voice rang through undergrowth.

Acornpaw cautiously crept to Beetlepelt's side, peering through the leaves. She could barely make out the deputy's pristine gray pelt.

Chaffinchflare then shouldered through the bush, before quickly being followed by Beetlepelt. The three apprentices were left stunned, alone, and next to the Thunderpath. Finally, Cherrypaw bravely pressed her nose through a gap in the leaves before hesitantly brushing through.

As soon as Cherrypaw vanished, both she and Strawpaw exchanged glances.

I'm not going in there! What if a Monster eats me?

"Come on! It's the coolest thing ever!" Came Cherrypaw's voice, just after letting out a squeal of excitement.

Finally, Acornpaw and Strawpaw went through side-by-side, Acornpaw cautiously keeping her ears alert. But as soon as they slipped out from the other side of the bush, she was met with a surprising sight.

A tunnel led directly *under* the Thunderpath, its dark hole gaping open. Goldpelt's amber eyes blinked from the shadows before he slipped out to welcome the apprentices.

"This is what we use to travel quickly through ThunderClan's territory to the Gathering. It's a secret only *ShadowClan* knows about," he told them.

"Right. Which means it must *stay* a secret to ShadowClan only," Chaffinchflare added. "You must not share this information with outsiders. When you go to your first Gathering, remember not to tell cats from other clans about this. No matter how friendly the cat is, it's none of their business. Is that clear?"

All three of the apprentices nodded quickly.

"Good. Now let's get moving," Goldpelt meowed, turning back to the bush and slipping through.

There is so much I never knew about my clan, she thought following the deputy. *Yet at the same time, it's interesting to learn about all the secrets and pieces of history behind it.*

I'm glad to be a ShadowClan cat.

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Chapter Four

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Acornpaw blinked wearily as she followed Beetlepelt through the thorn tunnel of camp, entering the pine forest. A layer of frost engulfed the branches above and pricked at her paw pads, the once soft ground littered with pine needles now a sheet of silver.

Today was the first frost of Leaf-bare, as well as her first day of real training. She had spent several days learning the warrior code, practicing moss-gathering, and practicing nest-building. She had already found being an apprentice to be terribly boring. But now that it was her first day to hunt, newfound excitement bubbled inside her. Beetlepelt had promised to teach her the basic hunting crouch and some other techniques ShadowClanners used for stalking. And, if all the prey hadn't been driven into their burrows from the cold, perhaps she may catch her first piece of fresh-kill.

"We'll stick closer to the ThunderClan border," Beetlepelt meowed, breaking the silence. "One of these days I'll show you how to hunt in the marsh. But most likely, that'll be in Newleaf."

"Why Newleaf?" Acornpaw inquired, gazing curiously off into the distance where the marsh section of the territory resided.

"That's when it becomes crowded with prey. Frogs, marsh birds, and sometimes fish. And, during Newleaf, it rains more often, and the prey enjoys that. They are *very* different from land prey."

"Wait, you said *fish*," Acornpaw mewed, eyes rounding. "But we're not RiverClan cats!"

Beetlepelt purred.

"No, we're not. But do you think it's a bad thing to have more

variety of prey?"

Acornpaw's brow furrowed thoughtfully.

"Well...no," she admitted. "Because then we'll be less likely to go hungry, right?"

Beetlepelt nodded. Then, he halted, opening his jaws and tasting the air. His eyes flashed with excitement.

"What can you smell?" He asked although a hint of anticipation crept at the back of his voice.

"Um."

Acornpaw tried to copy him, opening her mouth as well. After a moment of focusing intently, she caught a whiff of a tantalizing scent, causing her mouth to water. It was unfamiliar to her but certainly the smell of prey.

When she shot Beetlepelt a blank stare, he just shook his head.

"It's rabbit. They rarely stray from WindClan territory, so I assume you've never eaten one." Beetlepelt licked his chops. "But they're really good, you should try one sometime."

Acornpaw just stood there awkwardly for a long moment, before he seemed to realize that he needed to train her.

"Anyway," he said, lowering his voice. "Rabbits will be able to smell you before they hear you. Start with approaching them in a low crouch. I'll show you ShadowClan's stalking technique quickly before the rabbit runs off."

He quickly slipped into a large section with shadows cast by the trees, lowering himself to where the fur on his belly barely brushed the ground. Acornpaw watched as he tucked his tail under him, resting his ears flat across his head. She gazed thoughtfully at him. He did seem quite hidden, yet the white patches in his fur shone a little in the morning sunlight, still making him partially visible.

"It's better in the evening or at night. But it's still useful because

there is hardly any undergrowth in ShadowClan territory," Beetlepelt whispered, rising to his paws. "For now, you go ahead and try it."

"Why did you do that with your ears and tail?" She mewed as she attempted to crouch in the same area he had.

"For your tail, you don't want it to drag across the ground and make noise. It's not a requirement to tuck it in. You *can* just lift it slightly, but I prefer the former." Then, he flicked his tail across her ears. "And keep your ears flat against your head, because they may give you away. An enemy could see the silhouettes of them."

So is this for hunting or battles? She wondered.

Acornpaw held herself in place, legs quivering slightly from the awkward position. She wasn't sure if it was supposed to be so uncomfortable, or if it was something you grew used to over time. Either way, she seemed to be doing it right as Beetlepelt gave her a nod of approval, causing her to let out a purr of triumph.

"Now, do you think you can get that rabbit?" He asked quietly, although it wasn't exactly a question.

Acornpaw nodded before tasting the air again. She had grown better at scenting now so it didn't take long for her to catch a whiff of the rabbit. A second later, she was padding through the trees, keeping an observant eye out for her prey.

The sparse undergrowth blurred past her in a haze. Although impatience grew inside her, a twinge of excitement took hold as the scent grew stronger. Moments later, she rounded a small clearing filled with slowly dying grasses. Among them, the edges of pale brown ears poked out. She froze.

That must be the rabbit.

She hesitantly lowered herself into a hunting position.

Do I try to catch it? Shouldn't it have scented me by now? If it's not doing anything, can't I just sneak up on it?

She glanced back in the direction where she had left Beetlepelt. There was no sign of his black and white pelt pricking from the silent forest.

Acornpaw turned back, focusing on the rabbit.

He had said it would smell her before it saw her, yet it seemed that he was wrong. Instead of running away, it continued hopping through the grasses, nibbling at their stalks. She crept forward slightly, heart racing in her chest.

Suddenly, she felt the brush of wind across her face switch to where it was blowing from behind.

Then, its head shot up.

Its round eyes were bright with fear as it turned and darted into the pine trees. Acornpaw quickly scrambled to her paws and flung herself after it, paws pounding on the needle-strewn floor as she fought to reach it. Frustration wormed its way into her chest as she drove herself forward, regretting how much she had overthought it instead of trying to catch it first before it ran away. Yet there was no way to undo her actions as she continued to hare after it, the trees thinning around her as they reached a clearing.

The forest suddenly opened up, the Thunderpath immediately reaching her view. She expected the rabbit to dodge it, but instead, it continued to run, darting across the black stone. Acornpaw quickly slammed to a halt, breath coming in gasps as she watched it vanish into ThunderClan's oak forest.

"*Fox-dung*," she hissed under her breath.

A rustle came behind her and she quickly turned her head, only to see that it was Beetlepelt. He slipped out from the grass edging the clearing and padded over.

"It's okay," he mewed. "It's only your first hunt. You stayed upwind of the rabbit, which is good, but later the winds changed meaning it could smell you."

"I didn't know the wind had anything to do with hunting," she

sighed.

"Like I said, it's your first time," said Beetlepelt, flicking her ears with his tail playfully. "You're learning."

She nodded, although her tail still drooped with disappointment. She turned back and gazed into the direction of ThunderClan's trees longingly, wondering if the rabbit was watching her mockingly from their side of the border.

Beetlepelt padded past her, walking along the edge of the Thunderpath. He seemed to be focusing as his mouth was open, scenting the air. Acornpaw watched him curiously as he paced the border.

"ThunderClan scent is abnormally strong," he finally said after a long moment, a growl hidden beneath his voice.

He was right.

Drawing scents over her tongue, the overpowering odor of ThunderClan washed over her. She forced back a gag of disgust.

"How can a clan smell so dreadful?!" She exclaimed, wrinkling her nose.

"Wait until you smell RiverClan," Beetlepelt muttered absently. His tail was twitching.

Acornpaw tilted her head, switching her gaze to stare off into the distance, where RiverClan presumably resided. They were the only clan that didn't border ShadowClan. She knew that they were practically fish because they lived by and hunted in water. After a moment of pondering about the clan, she glanced back at her mentor, who had his brow furrowed, deep in thought.

"ThunderClan is trying to send a message," Beetlepelt finally growled, gazing into ThunderClan's woods. "We need to report back to Lakestar."

Acornpaw pricked her ears, feeling a spark of interest.

"And maybe ThunderClan has something to say to us at the Gathering tonight," Beetlepelt added.

"The Gathering?" Acornpaw echoed. She had forgotten it was the night of a full moon.

Beetlepelt nodded.

"Come on, let's head back to camp."

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It was almost sunhigh by the time they arrived back at camp. Almost the entire clan seemed to be in camp, with cats milling around the clearing.

Acornpaw followed her mentor toward the direction of Lakestar's den, feeling slightly nervous as they approached the large oak tree, where the den was situated under its roots.

"Lakestar?" Beetlepelt called softly from the entrance.

When there was no response, Acornpaw tasted the air. Her scent was stale.

"She's not here," he meowed before she could. "I bet she's on patrol. It's almost sunhigh, so she'll be back soon. Go grab something to eat, and I'll handle talking to her myself."

She dipped her head and scurried off to the fresh-kill pile. She immediately noticed the golden smoke pelt of her brother nearby, crouched as he tore into a pigeon.

"Strawpaw!" She skidded to a halt next to him.

He glanced up, surprised, before quickly swallowing a mouthful of his meal.

"Hi," he mewed. "Did you also go hunting today?"

She nodded.

"Yeah. I didn't do very well, but something exciting happened."

Strawpaw's ears pricked.

"What happened?"

Acornpaw began to nose through the pile.

"I'll tell you once Cherrypaw gets back. Speaking of which, where is she?"

Strawpaw's tail twitched impatiently, clearly wanting to hear the news.

"She's training with Goldpelt. I think Lakestar went along too, and maybe Runningpaw."

"So *that's* where Lakestar is!" She exclaimed.

Strawpaw pushed away the remains of his pigeon before turning a pleading stare onto Acornpaw with round, dark blue eyes.

"*Please* tell me," he begged.

She rolled her eyes.

"Fine, but let me grab something to eat first. I'm starving!"

She re-focused her attention back to the fresh-kill pile. Several scrawny mice lined the bottom, while a pair of crows was positioned at the very top. There were several shrews as well, and one loner frog. Leaf-bare had arrived, and the pile was certainly a lot smaller than it had been during Green-leaf.

Just as she was about to drag off a crow, she heard a small cough from behind her. She glanced over her shoulder, meeting the hopeful gaze of Strawpaw.

"You should try that frog. I caught it."

She glanced from the crow to the frog. Her belly growled. She did her best to ignore it.

A little disappointed that she wouldn't be able to enjoy a juicy crow but at the same time not wanting to crush her brother's spirits, she placed the crow back where she had found it and instead grasped the frog in her jaws. Her ears twitched as she heard a small purr rumble from Strawpaw nearby.

Just as she settled down next to her littermate, a rustle came from the thorn tunnel. Acornpaw looked up as Cherrypaw shouldered through, her golden-brown head held high as she strode into camp. Goldpelt and Lakestar fell behind the apprentice, heads bent close together as they discussed seriously. Behind them, the long ginger pelt of Runningpaw followed closely.

As soon as they entered the clearing, Beetlepelt hurried over to intercept Lakestar. Acornpaw spotted Strawpaw leaning forward slightly with interest from the corner of her eye as they both watched the two pad off in the direction of her den.

Strawpaw quickly glanced over at her.

"It must be so serious and exciting that Lakestar had to get involved," he mewed, fidgeting with impatience.

Cherrypaw bounded over to them, copper eyes brimming with triumph.

"I beat Runningpaw in battle training and he's *way* older than me!" She crowed, sitting down beside them restlessly. "I'm just that great, aren't I? I mean, even *Lakestar* complimented me."

Strawpaw ignored her.

"See, Cherrypaw is here! Can you tell me now?"

Cherrypaw leaped to her paws.

"Tell what? Who has a secret? Acornpaw, you have a secret?! What is it? Can you tell me? What's going on? What-"

Acornpaw slapped her tail over Cherrypaw's mouth.

"Calm down, I'll tell *both* of you."

She shot a glance over to where Lakestar and Beetlepelt had vanished. Her mentor still hadn't finished speaking, by the looks of it. The tip of her tail twitched with anticipation.

"So, I was hunting a rabbit near the ThunderClan border," she began, turning back to look at her littermates, who were listening intently.

"Did ThunderClan attack?" Cherrypaw asked quickly.

Acornpaw silenced her with a look.

"I chased the rabbit, but it escaped and ran off onto the other side of the border. That's when Beetlepelt came over, and all of a sudden-"

"Acornpaw."

She quickly turned around, almost leaping with surprise as the familiar black and white pelt of her mentor stood behind her.

"Lakestar will make an announcement just before we head off to the Gathering. Also, just a heads-up, you will be going."

Acornpaw's heart lifted with joy. She had only been made an apprentice several days ago, and she was already going to her first Gathering! She glanced back at her littermates, who stared at her with stunned faces.

As Beetlepelt padded away, Cherrypaw practically threw herself at Acornpaw, sending countless questions in her way.

"You get to go to the Gathering?! How is this fair? What happened? Did you do something special? What-"

"Great StarClan, let her finish the story!" Strawpaw hissed. "I want to hear it!"

Finally, Cherrypaw seemed to shut up. Acornpaw continued to tell the rest of the story, describing how ThunderClan's scent markers had been abnormally strong, and how Beetlepelt seemed to think they were trying to send a message with it.

"We should attack ThunderClan," Cherrypaw declared once she finished, digging her claws into the dirt.

"But what if it doesn't even mean anything?" Strawpaw argued.

"It looks like aggression to me," growled Cherrypaw.

"I guess we'll just have to wait until Lakestar gives her announcement," Acornpaw said with a sigh.

Today would be a long day.

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Luckily, the rest of sunhigh finished quickly, yet the rest of the day dragged by uneventfully. She spent some of the afternoon doing light hunting with Beetlepelt. She was finally able to catch her first piece of prey; a shrew. Besides that, her thoughts were filled with a mixture of anxiety and excitement as she awaited the announcement and the Gathering.

Eventually, the time finally came. She had been resting in the apprentice's den, which was sheltered by a large thorn bush. Her nest was slightly imperfect, as it had been something she spent only several moments building. Yet it was enough to soften her sore body from the tiring day.

"All cats old enough to lurk in the shadows gather beneath Shade Rock for a clan meeting!" Lakestar yowled, her voice ringing across the peaceful camp.

Her stomach flipped with nerves. She quickly pushed herself to her paws and hurried through the entrance of the empty den, moonlight bathing her pelt in a silver glow as she entered the clearing.

Lakestar's white and gray splotched pelt was lit into a brilliant luminosity under the star-speckled sky, her dark blue gaze sweeping over the quickly gathering clan. Acornpaw immediately spotted her littermates and began to make her way to them. But just as she was doing that, Runningpaw and Beetlepelt blocked her path.

Runningpaw was shooting a blazing glare at his brother, curling his

lip in a snarl.

"Watch where you're going," he hissed, before shouldering past Beetlepelt.

Acornpaw stared at the exchange, wide-eyed. She was so caught off guard by the interaction that she didn't have the chance to quickly move away and pretend she hadn't seen it. But it was too late, and Beetlepelt had already noticed her presence.

But to her surprise, he simply turned away and trudged off, his head down.

Why would Runningpaw act so rudely to him? They're littermates!

Then, realization hit her.

It must be because Beetlepelt got his warrior name before him...and an apprentice.

"Acornpaw! Get over here, or are you just going to stand there like a dumb rabbit?" Cherrypaw yowled at her.

Embarrassed, she quickly hurried over to her siblings. She settled down next to Cherrypaw. Several moments later, once the entire clan had gathered, Lakestar began.

"Before I name who will be attending the Gathering tonight, I have an important announcement."

The gathered cats pricked their ears.

"It has been noticed that ThunderClan's scent markers are *very* strong. Overpowering. As if they are trying to send a message to ShadowClan," Lakestar continued.

The clan immediately broke into argument, voices gradually growing louder to hear over one another. Acornpaw sat sullenly, irritated over the fact that Lakestar hadn't even mentioned her or Beetlepelt for *noticing* the scent markers in the first place. She tried to shrug it off, attempting to convince herself that it wasn't important enough to where she should have credit for it.

She's the leader, so she knows what she's doing anyway. I shouldn't be questioning her over little things. That would be disloyalty to my leader, and possibly breaking the warrior code!

Lakestar silenced them by raising her tail, glaring down disapprovingly.

"I know you all have your own little opinions over what I should do about ThunderClan, but I have already made my decision," she snapped. "I will be questioning Blazestar directly for the reasoning behind these strong border markers. He's not the kind of cat to expect to be called out for his actions, so he should be pretty caught off guard."

Strawpaw leaned toward Acornpaw's ear.

"I don't like the words 'should', 'maybe', and 'hopefully'. Makes me feel anxious. I like clear answers and a well-developed plan," he whispered.

Is Lakestar a bad leader for not having a clear plan? She wondered. Then, she shook the thought away. *She probably already has an entire plan but is keeping it to herself.*

"Who's going to the Gathering?" Brookdaisy called boldly.

Acornpaw noticed Cherrypaw watching him dreamily.

Lakestar frowned at him.

"Yes, I'm getting to that," she said smoothly, despite the irritated look written on her face. "I will be taking Chaffinchflare, Beetlepelt, Honeypelt, Pigeonsilk, Hazyfall, Brownsnout, Acornpaw, Strawpaw, and Cherrypaw. The medicine cats and Goldpelt will be going too, of course."

Brookdaisy let out a slight huff of annoyance that he wouldn't be going.

Strawpaw and Cherrypaw swapped overjoyed looks.

"We get to go to our first Gathering too!" Cherrypaw exclaimed.

For some odd reason, she felt a little tug of disappointment. It wasn't that she didn't want Strawpaw or Cherrypaw to go, but she would have liked the honor of being the only apprentice in ShadowClan getting to go because of what she and Beetlepelt had noticed at the border.

Realizing that the named cats were gathering by the entrance, she quickly hurried over, with Strawpaw and Cherrypaw at her heels. Moments later, Lakestar gave a signal and the clan silently slipped through the entrance.

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Chapter Five

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A sharp gale blew over the hushed patrol as Lakestar led them through the pines, their dark pelts blending in with the shadows of the night. Acornpaw shivered from the icy wind whistling in her ears, and the pricking frost beneath her paws. It was as if the freezing weather was foretelling the events that may take place at the Gathering.

Acornpaw recalled the stalking techniques Beetlepelt had taught her earlier in the day. She focused on keeping her paws falling lightly across the ground, breathing quietly, her tail tucked in, and her ears flat across her head. The black splotches on her pelt helped her intermingle with the shadows. The more the patrol padded on, the more she felt like a true ShadowClan cat, maintaining a stealthiness as they continued. Pride bubbled in her chest.

She followed Beetlepelt's familiar silhouette as they rounded the clearing where the Thunderpath lay. She carefully stepped over the roots of a slim tree before entering the grassy stretch of ground.

The Thunderpath seemed abnormally quiet, the strange dark stone snaking eerily between the oak forest and the pine. With a flash of fear, she remembered they would be using the tunnel instead of crossing the Thunderpath.

Acornpaw shuddered as Lakestar led them through the bushes lining the entrance to the tunnel, the fur along her spine prickling as she entered the pitch-black darkness below the Thunderpath. Her whiskers brushed against the hard walls, paws padding on the dusty ground. The familiar smells of her clanmates wreathed around her, offering some comfort.

After a long moment, she finally spotted a silver glow ahead. Her

pelt brushed against Cherrypaw's as they crawled out through the other side of the tunnel. The oak forest loomed around them, bramble thickets dotted along the tree line.

Cherrypaw looked as if she desperately wanted to talk but was painfully holding in her words. Lakestar had ordered not a single cat to speak on their way to the Gathering. It was an odd ShadowClan tradition.

They trekked on, staying along the edge of the Thunderpath. Lakestar skirted around several boulders and climbed up a small slope, Acornpaw fighting to keep up with the rest of the patrol. At the top of the slope, four massive oaks stretched into view, their canopies masking a portion of the sky. Her eyes rounded with awe.

Fourtrees!

As soon as they reached the undergrowth that lined the edges of Fourtrees, Lakestar gave a signal and the clan began to stream through. Acornpaw stuck close to Cherrypaw and Strawpaw, stomach twisting with nerves. Countless cats dotted a large clearing around a massive boulder, which she assumed to be the Great Rock from stories she had heard from Hazyfall.

"There are so many cats," Strawpaw gasped, looking stunned.

Cherrypaw nodded. Despite usually being the most confident out of the trio, her eyes were impossibly large and frightened.

"Where do we start?" Acornpaw wondered out loud. Would there be any apprentices their age? What if they were hostile? What clan would have the friendliest cats?

Her clanmates began to split off, greeting friends from other clans and weaving through the cats. Acornpaw and her littermates stood awkwardly, uncertain of where to start.

To her relief, Beetlepelt padded over to them. Acornpaw searched his gaze, wondering if he was still upset from Runningpaw's hostility earlier. But his expression was unreadable.

"Last time I was here when I was a 'paw, I talked to some nice

apprentices from RiverClan. Ripplepaw and Rapidpaw were their names," he said helpfully. He flicked his tail in the direction of a gray she-cat talking eagerly with a brown-cream she-cat and a light brown tabby tom. "And it looks like Rapidpaw is over there, speaking with some WindClan apprentices."

"Thanks, Beetlepelt," Acornpaw mewed, blinking gratefully.

"Come on!" Cherrypaw exclaimed, turning and bounding into the crowd.

Acornpaw and Strawpaw quickly followed their enthusiastic littermate, but Acornpaw found herself falling behind as she worked her way through the crowd.

All of a sudden, she felt herself practically get bowled over by a blur of brown tabby fur. She let out a yelp of shock.

Acornpaw quickly untangled herself from the tabby apprentice, feeling a sharp twinge of irritation.

"Watch where you're-"

Acornpaw's words froze mid-sentence as she was met by the most breathtaking pair of beautiful doe-brown eyes, soft yet full of energy.

"Sorry!" The she-cat mewed. "My sister got really mad at me because I was talking with this RiverClan apprentice-Ripplepaw-and my sister thought I was flirting with him! Well, he *is* really handsome, but-"

"And how did that end up with you knocking me to the ground?" She asked, snapping herself out of it.

"Like I said, my sister got mad at me," she said quickly. "Cloverpaw. Pain in the tail. And when she gets mad at me, it makes me mad too so I stormed off then I ended up here."

"Anyway, can we start over? My name is Sparrowpaw, and this is my first Gathering! I've been an apprentice for an entire moon. What about you?"

"I'm Acornpaw," she replied. "I've only been an apprentice for about a quarter moon, so you can probably assume that this is also my first Gathering."

Sparrowpaw tasted the air. Suddenly, her eyes narrowed as a note of distrust crossed her expression.

"Are you ShadowClan?"

Acornpaw furrowed her brow in confusion.

"Yeah. Why?"

"It's obvious. You stink of mud and toadstools. And my clan isn't too happy with your clan at the moment..."

Do I smell that badly?! Acornpaw wondered. She was unable to tell which clan Sparrowpaw was from due to the overwhelming jumble of different cat scents mingling in the air. But she *did* have a guess.

"So you're ThunderClan?"

"Yes," Sparrowpaw mewed sharply.

The last thing Acornpaw expected was a look of pure excitement to light up Sparrowpaw's expression.

"Blazestar ordered ThunderClan not to talk to any cat from ShadowClan," Sparrowpaw began, paws twitching restlessly.

Acornpaw frowned. What was Sparrrowpaw getting at? She gazed around the large clearing, eyes flicking from clanmate to clanmate. She could see Cherrypaw and Strawpaw chatting with Rapidpaw and the WindClan apprentices, yet she was unable to identify what cats from other clans her other clanmates were talking to.

"Okay..." Acornpaw narrowed her gaze, still confused by the enthusiasm lurking in her bright eyes.

"So this is a great way to practice being stealthy and secretive!" Sparrowpaw said brows furrowed as if confused by Acornpaw's lack of understanding.

She felt a flicker of pride.

But ThunderClan won't ever be as stealthy as ShadowClan, even if they try!

"So how is talking to me a good way to practice?" Acornpaw asked, pushing away her thoughts.

Sparrowpaw shot a fleeting glance around before bending her head closer to Acornpaw's, lowering her voice to hardly more than a whisper.

"Because my clan can't know that I'm talking with a *ShadowClan* cat."

Acornpaw nodded, although she was still puzzled, as well as intrigued.

"But why is ThunderClan avoiding ShadowClan?" She asked.

"ThunderClan has held a grudge against ShadowClan for a long time," Sparrowpaw explained. "I'm not too sure why, but they want to get revenge now."

Acornpaw's ears pricked up in interest. *So that must be why their border markers were so strong!*

Suddenly, a yowl rang through the clearing.

"May the Gathering begin!"

The many voices of the gathered cats faded as the four leaders sat tall, addressing the clans. Lakestar was among them, along with a golden tabby tom, a silver and white tom, and a brown and white tabby she-cat. At the foot of the Great Rock, she recognized Goldpelt seated with the three deputies from the other clans.

"Which one is Lakestar?" Sparrowpaw muttered in her ear, her muzzle wrinkled.

"The white one with gray spots," Acornpaw replied, gazing curiously at the leaders.

Acornpaw was about to open her jaws to ask which one was Blazestar, but the gathered cats had already fallen silent as they waited for the announcements to begin.

A silver and white tom nodded politely to the other leaders before stepping forward, his soft green eyes flicking over the throng of cats.

How can he be so calm when so many cats are watching?

"I think that's Swiftstar of WindClan," Sparrowpaw mewed quietly. "Apparently he's kind of weird and mysterious."

Acornpaw studied the tom. There didn't seem to be anything weird about him; he simply looked like any normal leader.

"Despite Leaf-bare approaching, WindClan has been thriving," he mewed. "Rabbits are plentiful as always. Not only that, we have had an important ceremony in the past day. I would like to welcome Redblaze as our newest warrior of WindClan."

Cheers lifted in the air, and heads turned to search for the said cat. After a moment, Acornpaw was able to spot a scrawny ginger she-cat, her head ducked with embarrassment.

That must be Redblaze, she decided.

As Acornpaw glanced at the she-cat, voicing in her share of cheering, she noticed how scrawny the new warrior seemed. Along with that, the cats surrounding her, most likely her clanmates, seemed just as thin, with their bones jutting out of their pelts. From what she had learned about the rival clans she knew that WindClan cats were usually lean, but this was abnormally skinny. In fact, they looked as if they were starving.

Acornpaw detected concern in Sparrowpaw's expression as she gazed at the WindClan cats.

So I'm not the only one who notices it.

Swiftstar must be lying when he says that WindClan is thriving...

"And there's one last thing," said the WindClan leader, silencing the clans once more. "Creekflight has recently kitted. I would like to congratulate her as well as welcome the new life she has brought into WindClan."

The clans purred their commendations for the queen. Eventually, once Swiftstar had fallen silent, presumably finished speaking, a golden tabby tom stepped forward, brushing past Swiftstar. His pale yellow gaze was cold and hostile.

"That's Blazestar," Sparrowpaw whispered in her ear.

Acornpaw nodded, her stomach twisting. The look on the tom's face sent the fur along her spine bristling. She had a bad, gut feeling about what was about to happen. Even Sparrowpaw looked nervous; her doe-brown eyes flickering and her paws twitching restlessly.

"I'm absolutely *done* with this prey-stealing!" Blazestar snarled. His head turned and he glared directly into Lakestar's face.

Lakestar rose to her paws. Her nostrils were flaring although she was taking deep breaths; she seemed to be trying to get her temper under control but her attempts were clearly failing.

"I know you're just trying to cause trouble, Blazestar," Lakestar hissed, her tail lashing. "It was clear when you basically drowned your stench all over the border, scaring away every piece of prey from your border all the way to the other side of our territory!"

There were several gasps of shock. Acornpaw noticed how Swiftstar was listening intently to the leaders' quarrel, his eyes sharp with interest. On the other hand, a brown and white she-cat, assumingly the RiverClan leader, was just staring down at her paws wearily.

Blazestar drew himself to his full height and peeled his lips back in a snarl of rage.

"Don't try to deny it! Just this morning my warriors found squirrel blood on the border. The day before that we found a half-eaten pigeon!"

Lakestar took a threatening step toward the ThunderClan leader, her fur bristling.

"Not once did you mention that there was *ShadowClan* scent on your side of the border! So why accuse us? Why not WindClan? They're starving, so it would make sense if *they* stole your prey!"

Screeches of fury arose from the WindClan cats. Warriors leaped to their paws, eyes flashing with anger and hisses rumbling in the air.

Acornpaw found herself pressing against Sparrowpaw's pelt, heart pounding loudly in her ears. She felt herself getting shoved a bit as warriors swept by, claws unsheathing and growls echoing through the air.

Everyone is about to fight!

She stared desperately over to where the mediators were huddled together.

Why won't they stop this?!

Suddenly, she felt darkness press around her. She looked up as smoky gray clouds drifted over the moon.

"StarClan is angry! The Gathering is over!" The RiverClan leader yowled, clearly ready to leave.

Acornpaw leaped to her paws, desperately searching for her clanmates. But she stopped as she felt a tail touch her lightly on her spine.

"Goodbye, Acornpaw," Sparrowpaw whispered, face dark with shadows yet eyes huge and frightened. Acornpaw quickly pressed her nose against the tabby's shoulder as a farewell before the she-cat hurried off.

She turned and continued looking for any ShadowClan cats. To her relief, she spotted both Strawpaw and Cherrypaw at the far edge of the clearing, looking disheveled as if they had been just fighting off several ThunderClan cats by themselves. Acornpaw raced over to greet them, fighting her way through the tight crowd of cats.

"Thank StarClan!" Strawpaw gasped, relief surging in his eyes as Acornpaw skidded to a halt next to her littermates. "I was wondering where you were! At the beginning of the Gathering, you vanished and I couldn't find you."

"Sorry, I got shoved aside and the Gathering started before I could catch up to you," she lied, deciding not to tell him that she had been speaking with a ThunderClan cat.

Acornpaw glanced at her sister. Cherrypaw's eyes were gleaming in the half-light, and her claws had slid out. Clearly, she had been itching for a fight.

"You three! Hurry up and join us before ThunderClan ends up deciding to attack us here!"

It was Chaffinchflare who had said this. The trio quickly bounded over, following the senior warrior as he led them to where the ShadowClan patrol had clustered around Lakestar and Goldpelt.

"Let's go," Lakestar snapped as soon as they reached them, her blue gaze radiating fire. She turned and stalked out the entrance, with the patrol at her heels.

Acornpaw felt dazed as they continued the trek home in silence. The events that had taken place at the Gathering still clung in her mind like a stubborn cobweb, unable to be shaken off. Not only that, countless thoughts circled her mind like a flock of birds.

Why does ThunderClan have a grudge against us? And why did Swiftstar seem so interested when Lakestar and Blazestar were arguing?

There certainly was something happening with WindClan. It didn't make sense why the clan was starving this early in Leaf-bare. Their state wasn't exactly unnoticeable. So why did Blazestar decide to accuse ShadowClan instead?

Acornpaw sighed quietly. There were far too many questions and far too few answers.

Eventually, after the patrol slipped through the tunnel and quietly treaded through the dark pine forest, the barrier of the camp came

into view. The cats slipped through the thorn tunnel, just before being greeted by the rest of the clan.

Back in the comfort of camp, she realized how exhausted she felt. But also with that, sharp pangs of hunger sliced through her stomach.

I'll eat first, then head to my nest, she decided.

Strawpaw and Cherrypaw were still following her as she padded over the fresh-kill pile. It had dwindled a lot compared to before they had left for the Gathering. Seeing that her measly shrew was still there from when she had caught it much earlier in the day, she hooked it up with her claw and set it on the ground, while her siblings each grabbed their own food.

"I hope there'll be a battle soon," Cherrypaw mewed between a mouthful of lizard.

Strawpaw looked anxious.

"I hope there *won't* be one. Battles are terrifying!"

"You've never been in one though," Cherrypaw argued.

Strawpaw fluffed up his fur defensively.

"Still," he mewed, taking a mouthful of his mouse. "Cats might die."

"I won't mind a battle until I have battle training," Acornpaw said, finishing her meal. "But I agree with Strawpaw. They're dangerous."

Acornpaw pushed away the remains of her shrew and stood to her paws, stretching her hind legs.

"I'm heading off to my nest," she said, swallowing back a yawn. "I don't want to be too tired for training tomorrow."

"Good idea," said Strawpaw, still looking anxious as he hurried after Acornpaw. A moment later, Cherrypaw followed them.

"Acornpaw! Strawpaw!"

She recognized her mother's voice and skidded to a halt. Both of her littermates did the same, pricking their ears.

Drystreak padded toward them. There was joy, along with a hint of shock in her copper eyes. Acornpaw tilted her head, eager to hear what her mother had to say.

"Wait here for a moment," she mewed. "I have to go find Fernfur. This is news for *all* of us to hear."

They nodded as Drystreak brushed past them.

A moment later she returned, followed by Fernfur. He looked perplexed but just as curious.

Once everyone had settled down, Drystreak gazed at them.

"I'm expecting kits."

Acornpaw's jaws fell open in complete shock.

But we just became apprentices! Does she want to be in the Nursery again, raising another litter?!

"I can't believe it!" Fernfur purred, pressing his muzzle against Drystreak's. "I've missed visiting the nursery to see the kits. Now you're all grown up and training to be warriors." He gazed at them sadly, clearly remembering those times.

"But we were just made apprentices a moon ago," Cherrypaw pointed out, reading exactly what was on Acornpaw's mind. "Surely you're not ready to go back to the Nursery?"

Drystreak glanced sharply at Cherrypaw.

"Are you not excited for more siblings?"

"That's not what I meant-"

"Maybe we'll get to be their mentors once they're apprentices!" Strawpaw mewed, cutting Cherrypaw off with a small warning glance as if stopping her from saying something stupid. Cherrypaw

just looked away, muttering something under her breath.

"Maybe," Fernfur purred. "But I'm not sure if Lakestar will allow that, especially since you're their kin."

Acornpaw's surprise at the news had faded away and was now replaced with utter exhaustion. Today had been the longest day ever. More than anything she longed to rest her weary muscles in her soft, moss-woven nest.

"I'm going to sleep," she mewed. "Goodnight."

She turned and padded into the den as her family called their goodnights. She was careful not to disturb the sleeping Runningpaw before she finally reached her nest, collapsing and sinking into its comforting warmth.

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Chapter Six

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Acornpaw struggled under the weight of Cherrypaw as the energetic she-cat pressed her to the ground. Her nose stung from the freezing earth, warping her senses as she struggled to throw her sister off.

She remembered when she was a kit, and Beetlepelt was an apprentice. She had watched him every morning battle train with Runningpaw. She fought to remember what move he had used once when he had been caught in the same situation.

Then, it flickered in her mind.

She twisted under Cherrypaw and raked her exposed belly with sheathed claws before sliding out from under her and leaped to her paws, facing her sister.

"Nice move, Acornpaw," Beetlepelt called from the edge of the training grounds.

She lifted her chin. Perhaps today would be better than the previous days of battle training. Her moves had been clumsy; distracted by the thought of battle lingering in her mind. Everyone was worried. Whispers drifted through the air. ThunderClan continued to be hostile to ShadowClan ever since the Gathering, and there had even been a few small scuffles, but nothing serious. Still, ThunderClan's border remained stronger than ever, a constant reminder that they were still seeking that apparent revenge that Sparrowpaw had told her about.

Acornpaw was so wrapped in her thoughts she barely noticed Cherrypaw's muscles tensing as she prepared to strike. A moment later, she shot through the air, the streak of fur flying at the edge of her vision shocking her out of her thoughts. Without thinking, she

clumsily skidded across the ground with a yelp, while Cherrypaw sailed past her, her outstretched paws thumping her on the spine before she landed with a crash on the hard ground.

She flinched, feeling her mentor's frustration radiating across the clearing. She refused to look in his direction, sensing the disappointment coming off in waves. Once again in that quarter moon, she was dozing off on her paws, caught in a haze of worries and wonders. Beetlepelt had always been patient with her, but even that was beginning to fade. She shook her head fiercely, urging herself to stay focused.

Cherrypaw had turned and was preparing to strike again, her copper eyes gleaming with the light of battle. This time, Acornpaw stayed alert. She tensed, muscles stiffening, and pretended she was about to pounce. She locked her gaze on Cherrypaw's paws as if she was aiming there. But even that trick didn't work; Cherrypaw, although seemingly focused on the spar, was completely unaware of small details.

Acornpaw shook her ears. *Fine, I suppose I have to learn how to deal with different kinds of opponents.*

So instead, she waited for Cherrypaw to strike first. As soon as her sister pounced, Acornpaw was ready. Just as she came crashing toward her, she ducked and grabbed her legs, yanking her out of the air and slamming her to the ground. Cherrypaw let out a yelp of shock, stretching her paws out defensively as her belly was now exposed. Acornpaw instead struck a sheathed paw toward her face, but Cherrypaw had a quick reaction and caught the blow, forcing one of Acornpaw's arms away before aiming a blow with her other paw. It was clumsy, but certainly caught Acornpaw off guard.

"That's enough," Goldpelt sighed, stalking toward them and prying the wrestling she-cats apart.

Acornpaw scrambled to her paws, shaking bits of leaf dust out of her pelt. Cherrypaw looked exhilarated, her nostrils flaring and paws twitching restlessly.

Beetlepelt padded over to Goldpelt's side, his expression

unreadable.

"That was..." he trailed off.

"...an interesting fight, I could say," Goldpelt finished for the younger tom. "It was an absolute mess. I've never seen anything like it. Clumsy with hardly any technique, but it wasn't too terrible."

Goldpelt seemed calm. From the many days she had been around him, she perceived him as the kind of cat to find the positive side of things, the type to say: "as long as it worked".

Beetlepelt, on the other claw, still looked irritated. She knew that Beetlepelt was headstrong for battle training, and seeing the messy show she had displayed had probably pained him deeply.

"Come on, Acornpaw," he said with a sigh. "Let's head back to camp."

She swallowed hard as Beetlepelt let her out of the training grounds toward the stream, leaving Goldpelt and Cherrypaw as the deputy constructed her sister on how to do better. Beetlepelt slowed his pace, silent for several long moments until eventually, he spoke.

"You've been distracted. A lot. Sometimes you barely notice what's a whisker in front of you. If someone shouted a command to you, you'd forget it a few seconds later. You seem to be in your own little world half the time. Is there something bothering you?"

She knew what he was saying was true, but the words still stung. She still recalled the night of the Gathering, after they returned to camp when she and her littermates had discussed the possible battle ahead between ShadowClan and ThunderClan. She had said that she didn't mind the prospect of it until she had battle training. But now that she and her littermates were practicing battle training almost every day, she was beginning to feel uncertain. What if a battle was just as dangerous as Strawpaw feared?

"Acornpaw, you're doing it again," Beetlepelt said, the frustration in his voice becoming increasingly more clear.

"I'm sorry," she muttered, avoiding his gaze.

I need to focus!

Beetlepelt sighed.

"I'm being serious. Are you bothered about something?"

Acornpaw stared at the ground. There wouldn't be any harm in telling him the truth, yet she wasn't exactly sure *how* she felt about a battle. Was she worried or excited?

Either way, she decided it wasn't best to share her feelings. Drystreak had told her once that doing so was simply immature and would spread negativity to the other cat. So she stuck with her mother's words and kept her jaws firmly shut.

Seeing that Acornpaw was refusing to answer, Beetlepelt just let out another sigh.

"Whatever it is that's bothering you, it's time to talk to someone about it or either let it go. You're training to be a *warrior*. Or have you forgotten?"

She shook her head mutely.

"Good, now let's head back to camp. You can help Honeypelt, Chaffinchflare, and Strawpaw patch the elder's den. After that, we'll go hunting."

"The elder's den? Why? There are no elders." Acornpaw glanced up at him in confusion.

"Chaffinchflare will likely retire once Strawpaw has completed his training," he explained.

She frowned.

"But that won't be until another five moons!"

Beetlepelt shrugged.

"He insisted on having it done now."

They fell into silence, padding on.

The sky was shrouded with stormy gray clouds as they continued toward the stream. Just as she prepared herself to leap on the fallen tree to cross the stream, she felt a stabbing pain shoot through her paw.

She let out a yelp, causing Beetlpelt to stumble in surprise. Thankfully, he was able to catch himself before he fell into the freezing water.

Acornpaw lifted her paw to inspect it. It barely took her a moment as she searched for the source of the pain; a huge thorn had dug itself into her pad. Just the sight of it made her flinch in pain.

Beetlepelt bounded over to check on her. He glanced at her paw pad that was splayed out, spotting the thorn.

"You better go see the medicine cats for that," he told her sympathetically. "That looks like a nasty thorn. Infection might set in."

For the rest of the way back to camp, she limped slightly, the nagging pain in her paw pricking the back of her mind, but she simply ignored it. She was relieved once she finally reached the medicine cat den and slipped inside.

Acornpaw was almost bowled over by Shrikestripe, a gray and white she-cat.

"Poor duckling! What happened to your paw?" She mewed, her voice laced with concern as she spotted the limp.

"Thorn," she replied, stretching out her paw so the medicine cat could inspect.

Shrikestripe eyes rounded sympathetically.

"It looks like it's pretty deep in your paw. Chasingfur is out right now collecting yarrow, so once he returns we'll treat it. For now, you can stay in a nest over here, and make sure to clean your paw pad thoroughly!"

The worried she-cat nudged Acornpaw over to a nest, bundled tightly in a corner. Several other nests were lined along the wall, which she assumed was for patients. Lying in one of the nests was a cat with rumpled, unkempt gray-pink fur. Her eyes rounded as she realized it was Sleetpath. A harsh cough wracked the she-cat's body.

Hesitantly, she settled down in the nest farthest from the sick warrior, worried about also catching yellowcough. She relaxed, finding that the nest was surprisingly comfortable.

Doing just as Shrikestripe instructed, she rasped her tongue over her paw pad. The pad throbbed as she cleaned, but she did her best to ignore it, not wanting Shrikestripe to fuss over her more if she expressed her pain.

Several moments later, ginger fur flashed at the edge of her vision. Chasingfur was pushing his way through the entrance of the den, a clump of pale white flowers clamped in his jaws. She noticed that flecks of white dust were littered on his back. For a moment, she thought it was the petals of the yarrow, but then she realized it had a far too frost-like texture to it. To add to that, she could see that he was shivering slightly.

Spotting Chasingfur, Shrikestripe's face brightened.

"Yarrow!" She exclaimed. "I was worried most of it had been killed off by the cold. Speaking of which, you look like you're freezing!"

Chasingfur dropped the yarrow, letting out a sigh.

"It's snowing out there. Which means it's best you go out there now and collect as much tansy as you can before that dies off too."

Shrikestripe's fur fluffed out.

"Oh no! I'll go right away. And can you give some of that yarrow to Acornpaw over there, please? She has a thorn in her pad."

Chasingfur nodded before Shrikestripe hared out of the den, vanishing into the flurry of gray and white whirling through the air. Seeing the cold hues of the outside world made her feel warmer, reminding her that she was safe, nestled in the comfort of a

sheltered den.

The ginger tom pushed some of the yarrow he had gathered into a large rock crevice, stacked with many different leaves and flowers. He then carefully picked up the remainder of the yarrow in his jaws.

"Let me see that paw," Chasingfur said gruffly, padding over to the edge of her nest, with the clump of flowers delicately held between his teeth. "And I hope you cleaned that pad of yours!"

"Of course," she mewed, nervous under the authority of the much older and wiser feline. She extended out her leg to allow Chasingfur to examine it.

A moment later, he chewed up the yarrow before delicately applying the poultice to her pad.

"That should help soften the pad. Later the thorn will have gone," said Chasingfur. "Knowing how apprentices are, you're staying in here for the rest of the day just so I can keep an eye on it."

The medicine cat turned and walked toward an area near the rock crevice. Small boulders had piled up, and a tiny pool of water had collected at the bottom of it. There was a hole in the roof of the den above the boulders; she assumed this was how water had come through in the first place. Chasingfur lapped at the pool, while Acornpaw shifted in her nest, feeling a twinge of boredom. It was only Sun-high. Today would be excruciatingly long, trapped in the medicine den.

As another loud cough rang out from where Sleetpath lay, Chasingfur quickly stopped drinking and hurried over to the herb storage, grabbing several green leaves that were speckled with gray before heading over to the sick she-cat.

"Eat these," he said gently. "WindClan was kind enough to spare some of their lungwort. It's the only cure for yellowcough."

Acornpaw turned away, unable to bear watching the sick warrior any longer.

Acornpaw focused on gazing at the swirling depths of cold silver storming through the sky outside the den, enthralled by Leaf-bare's beauty. The sparkling sheet of white crystalline glittered in the soft and faint haze of light, blanketing the ground in a cold embrace.

A memory stirred in her mind, awakening from its hibernation, clawing its way out of the deep sea of snow and letting the slowly warming air bathe its coat.

Acornkit, Cherrykit, and Strawkit twitched restlessly as they waited for Fernfur to begin the story. The kits' short and clean fur gleamed in the fresh sunshine, while their round eyes fixed eagerly on their father.

"Many seasons ago, on one of the harshest Leaf-bares known to ShadowClan, I was born. Prey was scarce. Many cats went to sleep on empty stomachs. This was a long Leaf-bare of course, which meant as a kit I slowly grew to understand the hardships."

Fernfur swallowed hard. A hint of sadness lingered in his expression.

"I began to understand more with how little milk my mother could give me... because of the lack of prey. She was starving. But there was one day that may have changed my perspective of Leaf-bare completely, and showed that there were still joyful moments in those difficult times."

Cherrykit tipped her head.

"But how? Leaf-bare is terrible!"

"I'll tell you. One day, a strange white dust fell from the sky, freezing to the touch. The dust collects on the ground and looks like a soft moss nest. It's what we call 'snow'. It's frozen, powdery rain. Seeing snow for the first time was lovely. Other kits in the nursery came out to play in the snow, as well as the apprentices. Even some of the warriors! Eventually, moods were lifted as the entire clan was frolicking in the snow. It was a beautiful sight to see."

Fernfur grew solemn.

"So, remember kits, there will be many hardships in the future. Difficult Leaf-bares, battles, and many other possibilities. You must learn to look past the negative things and search for the positive aspects. Enjoy every

beautiful moment that comes to you. And never take anything for granted!"

Acornpaw snapped out of her thoughts.

Chasingfur had stopped drinking out of the pool and was now sitting across from her nest, staring outside as well.

"What are you thinking about?" He asked quietly.

She glanced up sharply with surprise, before shaking her ears.

"I was just remembering something Fernfur told me and my siblings when we were kits," she mewed.

Chasingfur twitched his ears in acknowledgment. He looked thoughtful as he gazed at the frozen world outside.

"Leaf-bare always makes a cat wonder," he sighed. He suddenly looked countless moons older, his body thin and his pelt unkempt, specks of gray fur dusted on his muzzle. "As each snow falls, you wonder if perhaps the clan will make it through this season. Or, if you're old like me, you wonder if this Leaf-bare may be your last."

Acornpaw's eyes grew round.

"What do you mean last...?" She began nervously.

He gave a half-hearted chuckle.

"You know what I mean. It happens to every cat. It'll happen to me someday. You'll understand when you reach my age when your bones can hardly support you anymore, and the aches in your body grow to be unbearable, and the thought of joining StarClan will be peaceful compared to your state now."

Acornpaw, although understanding his words, felt a twinge of sympathy, mingled with a faint hint of worry.

No matter how much pain I could experience, I would never *want to leave behind my family and join StarClan! Could he really be right?*

"Like I said, you'll understand it all someday," he said, as if reading her thoughts.

She would have liked to ask further, but she couldn't find the right words. Plus, he seemed convinced that she was too young to understand. So instead, she pushed the thoughts away.

Acornpaw just silently shifted in her nest again, attempting to splay out the paw where the thorn had been caught, worried of somehow ruining the poultice that had been delicately applied.

She then glanced at Chasingfur from the corner of her eye. Something was nagging her in the back of her head, yet she wasn't sure if she should ask out loud. But at the same time, Chasingfur seemed like the right kind of cat for advice.

"What do you think about battle?" She finally blurted out. "You know how there's been...well, problems with the border between us and ThunderClan-do you think one *will* happen?"

Chasingfur blinked slowly.

"It is for Lakestar to decide whether or not a battle will happen," he began. "But, if you're asking my opinion on a battle, I would say I prefer them not to happen because it's very stressful for us medicine cats. We can't foretell how severe the injuries may be."

A new bout of worry swept through her. Strawpaw had said it before, and now Chasingfur. Injuries could be fatal. She shuddered as she tried to push away the thoughts of what sort of pain could be inflicted on her littermates during a battle.

Chasingfur, seemingly reading her expression, softened his voice.

"I know you're asking because you're worried about what may happen if there is a battle. Yes, deaths can happen, but that's part of life. You've received a good amount of training from Beetlepelt I presume, seeing how Lakestar has ordered all of the mentors to focus on teaching battle moves." Chasingfur began to pad toward the back of the den, over to the herb storage. "So try to take your mind off of it. Whether one happens or not, you're prepared."

Her shoulders loosened slightly at his words, along with a prick of determination.

He's right. Beetlepelt has been training me. I should be focusing on that instead of worrying about a battle so I can be prepared.

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Chapter Seven

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"Your pad is fine now, you're free to go back to your regular duties," Shrikestripe announced after carefully examining her paw.

Was it really that serious that I had to be cooped up in the medicine den for the rest of the day? She thought with a flicker of irritation. The sharp and displeasing tang of herbs lingered unpleasantly in the air, giving her a sour mood just as strong as their taste.

Just as she began to slip out of the entrance of the den, she came to a sudden halt. The snowstorm had died down, leaving a fresh blanket of white across the ground, smooth and soft in the dim light. The uneven piles of snow she had seen earlier in that day when the snowstorm had just started was barely comparable to what lay in front of her now.

Not only that, but the Leaf-bare cold had also formed strange frozen spikes of ice that stretched down from the roof of the medicine den, clattering against one another as a bitter wind blew through the camp.

Shrikestripe had padded up beside her and gazed up at the ice.

"I'll have to talk to Lakestar about those and see if we should get warriors to remove them," she mewed, her emerald eyes anxious as she gazed up at the sharp pieces of ice, dangling precariously as if they may break off at any moment.

Suddenly worried one would fall on her, she quickly stepped away, only to freeze with shock. Her paws sank into the snow, numbing her pads with a burning cold.

That's freezing! She thought. Finally, after a moment, she took a few

more cautious steps. The more quickly she moved forward, the less her pads would have to experience the discomfort of the snow-laden ground.

She stopped and looked around the clearing.

Near the Shade Rock, Goldpelt was organizing patrols. Several cats lingered near him, including Cherrypaw, clearly waiting for her mentor to finish.

"Hey, Acornpaw!" Strawpaw called.

Her brother was bounding over to her, his golden pelt flecked with snowflakes. His cobalt eyes were sparkling, reflecting the pale gray-blue light.

"I came up with a great game to play," He announced. "We can do a race, and see who can run the fastest in the snow!"

"But racing is boring," she sighed. "Why can't we play something else? Like moss-ball, except with snow?"

Strawpaw flicked her ears with his tail.

"You just don't want to admit you're a slow slug," he teased.

"Am not."

"Yes you-"

"Acornpaw."

Beetlepelt was padding over to them, his yellow gaze unreadable.

"Yes?" She mewed, turning away from Strawpaw to face her mentor.

"Just to make sure your pad completely heals up, you can stay in camp for the rest of the day," said the tom. "However, you can still be useful. You can go ahead and clean out the old nests in the nursery."

Acornpaw's tail drooped with disappointment. One little thorn

couldn't be that serious! Did Beetlepelt just think that she was too distracted in battle training and that there was no use in trying to teach her any battle moves at all?

"Okay," she finally muttered.

As Beetlepelt padded away, Strawpaw glanced at her sympathetically, with a small hint of disappointment.

"I guess we can play some other time," he said. Then, he glanced over in the direction of Chaffinchflare, who seemed to be in a serious conversation with Hazyfall, their heads bent close together. "Chaffinchflare said he would be taking me hunting later, but he seems to be busy. So maybe I could help you?"

"Okay, I might need the help, there's a lot of nests in the nursery" she purred, suddenly grateful for how obliging her brother always was.

"I'll go get fresh moss in the medicine den," she added. "You can start dragging out the old nests."

She headed directly back toward the medicine den for fresh moss. She was reminded once again that Drystreak was pregnant and would be moving to the Nursery, so she would have to make a new nest for the expecting queen. The idea of more siblings still seemed foreign to her. It was almost impossible to imagine other cats romping around with her, Cherrypaw, and Strawpaw.

With a sigh, she slipped inside the warm shelter of the medicine den, blinking as she adjusted to the dim light. Shrikestripe was checking on Sleetpath, who was awake with wide blinking eyes. Acornpaw felt relieved to see that the brightness of fever in the she-cat's gaze had diminished, and her pelt was sleek and gleaming as if it had just been thoroughly cleaned. Perhaps her case of yellowcough was finally withdrawing.

Chasingfur, on the other paw, seemed to have every single herb from his storage strewn across the floor. She was careful to avoid straying leaves as he organized them into different piles.

"Back so soon?" He asked sharply as she approached. "What now? Another thorn?"

Her ears pricked in surprise at the sudden edge to his voice. But after a second she shook off her surprise, deciding that Leaf-bare's cold had probably got under his skin.

"I just needed some moss," she mewed. "I have to go clean out the nursery, and I'm making a nest for Drystreak."

As if her words had summoned her, the dorsal-striped ginger she-cat bundled herself through the entrance of the den.

Her mother blinked warmly as she spotted Acornpaw.

"Acornpaw! I heard you had a thorn in your pad. It's better now, I hope?"

She gritted her teeth.

And another cat worrying about that stupid thorn! It really was not that big of a deal!

"Yes, I'm better," she muttered.

"Drystreak? How can I help you?" Chasingfur asked politely, indicating for Acornpaw to head toward the back of the herb storage.

"I just wanted to make sure my kits were doing fine," she meowed, the usual gruffness in her mother's tone returning. "I knew it was a mistake from the start when I decided to have my first litter so late. I'm old now. And I know there's been problems in the past with elderly queens having kits..."

Acornpaw, finding the moss, which was sheltered in several large crevices in the boulders that formed the back of the den, clawed it up carefully into a ball and grasped the bundle in her muzzle.

"You're perfectly healthy just as any other queen would be," said Chasingfur as Acornpaw made her way out of the den. "Your kits will be fine. Come to me if you feel any pain at all, alright?"

Their voices faded out of earshot as she exited the den and made her way toward the nursery. The den was dark, with no sunshine lightening the inside from the heavy clouds obscuring the sky above. She dropped her moss in the corner and began to assist Strawpaw in their tedious task of dragging out every old nest, including Brookdaisy's and Pigeonsilk's, and leaving them to dispose of camp later.

"I've forgotten there were other queens in the nursery, before Drystreak," she mewed out loud.

Strawpaw nodded in agreement.

"I overheard Chaffinchflare once say that ShadowClan is at its weakest. The clan hasn't seen a full nursery in many seasons."

I always thought ShadowClan was the strongest clan in the territories, she mused. *I guess I was wrong.*

One of the nests smelled faintly of Drystreak and her littermates. She remembered the feeling of warmth and safety as she curled up close to her mother's warmth, Cherrykit and Strawkit cuddled next to her, the comforting milk scent lulling her to sleep.

She shook away the cozy memory and finished clearing out the last of the nests before the den was completely empty. She carefully began to weave together Drystreak's new nest, then turned and headed toward the fresh-kill pile to perhaps find a bird she could pluck the feathers off of and add to the queen's freshly made nest. She didn't think anyone would mind if their meal was less... feathery.

Finally, after making sure the nest was as cozy as possible, the dainty feathers softening the nest, she began to work on one of the nests for Pigeonsilk and Brookdaisy.

Eventually, she and Strawpaw finished. She backed out of the den and began to clean her now rumpled fur, smoothing it under her tongue and picking out pieces of straying moss. As she and her brother silently cleaned their pelts, a sudden crash caused her head to shoot up in surprise.

Cherrypaw had barged through the entrance of the camp, her eyes huge with blood dripping from her pelt.

"ThunderClan attack! Border! Our patrol is outnumbered!" Cherrypaw yowled.

Cherrypaw's breaths were coming in gasps, her paws twitching restlessly at the same time.

She and Strawpaw exchanged wide-eyed looks.

Lakestar raced out of her den.

"What's going on?" She demanded.

"She says ThunderClan attacked her patrol at the border, and they seem to be outnumbered," Hazyfall explained sharply from nearby.

"Fernfur is on that patrol!" Came the worried voice of Drystreak.

Lakestar's ears flattened.

"Those petty mice-munchers, attacking a patrol with only three warriors and an apprentice!" She growled. "I'll take a patrol. Sleetpath-"

"*Sleetpath?*" Shrikestripe gasped, whose round eyes were peering out from the entrance of the medicine cat den. "She's still weak from yellowcough!"

"WindClan gave us some lungwort, didn't they?" Lakestar snapped impatiently. When the anxious medicine cat gave a small nod, she went on, "Then, in that case, she should be better by now. It was a quarter moon ago when they spared the herb."

Shrikestripe just looked from Lakestar to the den anxiously, looking torn. A moment later, Chasingfur bustled out of the den, stopping beside Shrikestripe.

"Sleetpath will be fine," he said gruffly. "Her fever is gone. She's more than ready to leave the den."

"Good." Lakestar's tail tip was twitching as her gaze circled the clearing. "Chaffinchflare, Beetlepelt, Runningpaw, Strawpaw, and Acornpaw, you'll come with me as well."

Acornpaw's ears pricked with excitement at the mention of her name. *Finally, what I've been training for!*

"I can fight too," Brookdaisy called, who was standing next to Pigeonsilk, his dappled head raised high. "I've learned some battle moves in my training as well!"

Pigeonsilk was nodding in agreement. Clearly, he wanted to fight too.

Lakestar's gaze met Pigeonsilk's. There seemed to be some sort of message that passed between the two of them before Lakestar eventually shrugged.

"Fine, you two can go with us," Lakestar muttered, although her voice sounded forced.

Acornpaw raced over to Beetlepelt's side, digging her claws into the ground. Every nerve in her body was fizzing with anticipation.

Her mentor rested his tail lightly on her shoulders.

"It's just a little border skirmish," he said quietly, obviously sensing her apprehension. "A real battle has not come yet."

Not yet...

"Enough dawdling! Some of my warriors are fighting tooth and claw right now!" Lakestar yowled, her blue eyes welling with impatience. Raising her tail as a signal to follow, she raced through the entrance, her white and gray spotted pelt vanishing in the thickets of thorns weaving the entrance.

The rest of the patrol hastily sprang after their leader. Acornpaw fought to keep Beetlepelt's long-legged pace as they dove after Lakestar into the pine trees, hues of whites and grays flashing at the edge of her vision.

Her breath came in wisps through the air as she ran, like a mixture of snow and fog dancing lightly. Her chest burned from the stabbing cold, while her ears and paws were numbed against Leaf-bare's breath. She ducked low-hanging tree branches, dodging tree roots, and leaping over fallen pines as she darted through the forest, her legs tiring rapidly.

Cherrypaw, who had already run all the way to camp and was now back, was clearly exhausted. Her copper eyes, although impossibly big and round with excitement, had a bit of weariness lingering in them, and she was beginning to fall behind before eventually racing on Acornpaw's flank. Yet somehow, despite the tabby's depleted state, she kept a fast pace with an overwhelming amount of energy.

Soon enough, Lakestar began to slow as the pine trees grew sparse.

Suddenly, she began to pick up yowls of anger and screeches ringing through the air. Acornpaw's stomach twisted with apprehension.

At the edge of the Thunderpath, Honeypelt and Goldpelt were slashing angrily at two warriors advancing on them, eyes slit with rage. Only a fox-length away Fernfur was tussling with a russet tom, yowling with fury. However, all three of the ShadowClan cats' blows were weak. They were clearly beginning to tire.

Acornpaw noticed several ThunderClan cats hanging a little ways apart from their clanmates, crouched in the grass with muscles tensed.

They're waiting for something.

Her ears flattened.

They must've known we got backup!

"ShadowClan, drive those fox-hearts off our territory!" Lakestar screeched, her command splitting the air.

"Fight beside me!" Beetlepelt hissed before diving into the fray, while the rest of the patrol leaped forward on either side of her.

Beetlepelt landed on one of the warriors attacking Honeypelt and Goldpelt, raking her flank fiercely and causing the she-cat to let out a screech of pain. Acornpaw quickly dove under her legs and nipped at her paws.

The she-cat leaped over Acornpaw and turned on both of them, hissing furiously. As Acornpaw darted forward to aim a blow toward her face, the she-cat ducked and bowled directly into her, sending her tumbling to the ground with a yelp of surprise. As Acornpaw sank her teeth into one of the she-cat's paws in an attempt to escape her grip, Beetlepelt sprang on the warrior's back and began to tear at her fur mercilessly, giving her a chance to slide free.

The warrior twisted under Beetlepelt and kicked fiercely at his belly, hissing and spitting with pain. Acornpaw rushed forward and clamped her jaws on her tail, while Beetlepelt dug his claws into her shoulders.

Acornpaw realized that the writhing she-cat had begun to still. She backed away slightly as the ThunderClan warrior stared up at Beetlepelt's blood-stained jaws, eyes round and pleading.

"*Go*," he hissed, releasing his grip.

The she-cat turned and fled across the Thunderpath, leaving a trail of scarlet in her desperate path.

Acornpaw's ears flattened, turning away and scanning the throng of fighting warriors. Brookdaisy and Pigeonsilk were fighting side-by-side as they assisted Honeypelt, fending off his attacker as the weakening warrior did not have enough strength to fight alone. Cherrypaw was fighting alongside Goldpelt, her yowls of fury easily recognizable above the sound of roaring warriors. Strawpaw was nearby with Chaffinchflare, sending fierce blows in the direction of a ThunderClan apprentice and its mentor.

Then, she spotted Fernfur.

His usual vigor was rapidly diminishing as a black and dark ginger tom battered at his face, causing her father to stumble back, his

blows weak and clumsy.

Acornpaw's heart raced with fear as she quickly turned to Beetlepelt.

"Fernfur needs help!" She gasped.

"Help him," he said with a quick nod before he turned and raced over to Runningpaw's side.

Acornpaw darted through the midst of the fighting, keeping her eyes trained on Fernfur while pushing herself with much difficulty through the thick layer of blood-stained snow.

She yelped in shock as Sleetpath came crashing to the ground next to her, knocked off her paws by an attacking she-cat. She could hear her clanmate's breath rattling in her chest as she scrambled to her paws, facing the warrior once more and blinking harshly. Acornpaw turned and continued to head in her father's direction.

Her path was suddenly blocked by a snarling tom apprentice, his russet fur bushed up until he seemed to be twice his size. She tensed her muscles, peering over his shoulder at Fernfur.

While she was more focused on Fernfur, the apprentice caught the chance to race forward and swing a hard blow on her head, sending her reeling backward, gasping from the force of the attack.

Gathering up strength, she turned and met another blow, shoving him to the ground. She dug her hind claws into his tail, while she raked her claws across his belly.

He turned, avoiding another blow on his belly which landed on his shoulder instead. She reared up on her hind legs, preparing to crash down on him, but he sprang up and wrapped his paws around her, sending the two into a tumbling ball of screeching and clawing.

Her vision grew hazy with red as blood splattered on her face. She kicked at his belly, ripping shreds of fur, while he dug his claws into her shoulders and snapped at her pelt.

"ShadowClan, retreat!"

He grew limp allowing her to squirm free, panting hard. Her clanmates turned and began to flee away from the ThunderClan cats.

But we're on our own territory! We can't retreat!

There was no choice. As she began to follow her patrol, she spotted Fernfur hobbling after them, blood dripping rapidly from wounds along his flanks. She was relieved to see that he was still standing on his paws and quickly hurried on.

The ThunderClan cats watched them leave, jeering and hissing. She pinned her ears on her head, attempting to block out the sound.

The forest began to grow quiet around them as they padded back to camp. Lakestar was in the lead, with Pigeonsilk pressed against her, murmuring comfortingly in her ear. Goldpelt, Honeypelt, Beetlepelt, and Runningpaw were hoisting the body of Sleetpath. Acornpaw's eyes grew wide at the sight of the previously sick she-cat. Deep wounds marred her gray-pink pelt, with blood staining her fur.

She shuddered and looked away. At that moment, Strawpaw and Cherrypaw padded to her side, their tails drooping.

Eventually, the battered patrol reached the camp. They were greeted by gasps of shock as they saw the damage inflicted by ThunderClan.

"Sleetpath!" Shrikestripe gasped. "Great StarClan! Bring her inside immediately!"

As the warriors carried her to the medicine den, Chasingfur padded past them and headed over to the remaining patrol, holding a bundle of herbs in his jaws.

"Everyone, clean your wounds thoroughly," he ordered between his mouthful.

As she began to clean herself, Strawpaw spoke quietly.

"I hope Sleetpath is going to be okay," he mewed, his eyes dark with worry. "She and Honeypelt are littermates. I couldn't imagine what

it must be like to lose a littermate."

She nodded in agreement.

Perhaps Lakestar shouldn't have brought her to the battle. Shrikestripe said it herself that she was still weak from yellowcough.

Eventually, Chasingfur reached her. He nosed through her pelt, checking for wounds.

"You have some scratches on your flanks, but they're shallow," he told her. "But there is one on your shoulder I'm uncertain about. I'll apply some poultice, but the rest of them I don't want to waste herbs on. Just clean them constantly and come back to me if you feel worse."

"Stay still," he said, chewing up several herbs and carefully applying them to her shoulder. She relaxed a little as the juices began to soothe the wound.

After Chasingfur stood up and padded on to treat Cherrypaw's injuries, she scanned the clearing. Beetlepelt and Runningpaw were talking quietly with each other, and she was pleasantly surprised to find that neither of them had looks of anger or spite written on their expressions as they spoke; perhaps they had gotten over their argument.

Lakestar and Goldpelt were sitting near Acornpaw and the other apprentices, allowing her to overhear their conversation.

"That was no skirmish. That was a *slaughter*," Goldpelt was saying. His normally calm and soothing voice was shaken. "Whatever revenge ThunderClan is seeking, they obviously want to deal a great amount of damage on our clan."

"Which is why we need to strike back *immediately*," Lakestar snarled.

Goldpelt's ears twitched with surprise.

"I don't think that's a good idea at all," he reasoned cautiously. "Our warriors are wounded. Some are severe. Sleetpath is not in a good condition at all either. I believe it's best if we wait."

"You're wrong," she said stubbornly. "There are warriors with minor injuries that can still fight. We must show ThunderClan that ShadowClan won't back down so easily!"

"*No*, Lakestar," Goldpelt said firmly, his eyes narrowing. "I don't think any of the clan will appreciate if we send them directly back into battle. I'm sure the medicine cats would agree with this, especially because supplies are low. It's *Leaf-bare* right now."

Lakestar sighed loudly.

"Whatever you wish, Goldpelt," she snapped. "But a battle is inevitable. It *will* happen."

"Then we will prepare," he said, the calmness in the deputy's voice returning. "But that battle will not happen today."

Acornpaw glanced away, just as Beetlepelt padded over to her.

"You fought valiantly," he told her, his yellow eyes glowing. "All that time spent battle training didn't go to waste after all. You should be proud of yourself."

Acornpaw purred in delight, licking her chest fur in embarrassment.

Beetlepelt nodded over to Strawpaw and Cherrypaw.

"I saw both of you fighting as well. You fought like warriors."

Cherrypaw's eyes shone, while Strawpaw dipped his head, a purr rumbling in his throat.

As Beetlepelt padded away, Drystreak hurried over to them.

"Chasingfur treated your scratches, I hope? Your wounds are not hurting you?" She sniffed each of their pelts' anxiously.

"Yes. We're okay, don't worry," Strawpaw told her.

"This stupid ThunderClan cat bit my paw," Cherrypaw complained, holding out her paw.

Drystreak inspected it.

"I'm sure you'll be fine," she mewed.

Drystreak glanced expectantly over at Acornpaw.

"I have a nasty scratch on my shoulder, but other than that I'm okay," she said.

"I'm glad it wasn't any worse," their mother sighed.

"Great StarClan! I really wasn't expecting you three to be sent off on your first battle today," she added. "I hardly had a chance to say goodbye!"

"It wasn't even much of a battle," Cherrypaw said, disappointment clear in her voice. "ThunderClan started yowling insults at us over the border and then ran over and attacked us! We were doing okay until they brought another patrol, which wasn't even fair because there were only me and three warriors and they brought like, their entire clan!"

"Be grateful it wasn't much of a battle," Drystreak growled. "The injuries could have been much more fatal."

Cherrypaw muttered to herself under her breath.

Drystreak gazed at her sharply. "What was that?"

Cherrypaw's tail twitched.

"All I said was we put up that much of a fight for us to end up losing *sorely*," she said, her ears pinned across her head.

Drystreak sighed.

"Enough of this battle talk. All three of you should go to your nests and get plenty of sleep so I'm reassured that your scratches will heal properly."

"But mom, the rest of the clan is still awake," Cherrypaw complained. "Do we-"

Shrikestripe suddenly burst through the entrance of the medicine den, shock and grief darkening her emerald gaze.

"Sleetpath's injuries were far too severe. She didn't make it," she said to Lakestar.

Honeypelt rose to his paws, his jaws gaping open in shock. Acornpaw was reminded that he and Sleetpath were littermates.

As grief-filled murmurs swept through the camp, Honeypelt stumbled into the medicine den. Acornpaw just stared silently, her chest hollow.

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Chapter Eight

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Two sunrises had passed since the fray at the border, and Acornpaw found it impossible to have a normal conversation without someone mentioning the impending battle on the horizon.

Although Lakestar had not announced anything directly to the clan about the battle ahead, she'd seen the leader speaking quietly with Goldpelt, Chasingfur, Shrikestripe, and Chaffinchflare, her closest advisors, on multiple instances.

"Acornpaw."

Beetlepelt was padding over to her, causing her to snap out of her thoughts.

"We're going on a border patrol later. Goldpelt wants us to stay in camp because Lakestar will be making an announcement soon and wants the entire clan here."

Acornpaw's ears pricked.

"It must be important," she mewed, glancing curiously at Shade Rock.

She noticed there was a small hint of excitement in Beetlepelt's gaze.

"Runningpaw will be made a warrior today," Beetlepelt said, his tail twitching excitedly.

She was startled by the eagerness lighting his gaze. It was strange to hear her mentor talk with so much enthusiasm. He always seemed to have a...flat and almost sharp tone of voice. She would sometimes wonder if the very thought of being a mentor bored him

so deeply that he couldn't even bring his voice to sound cheerful.

Maybe whatever arguments that have been going on between him and Runningpaw caused him to sound so distant all of the time. And maybe, those arguments have finally cleared up, she offered herself.

Acornpaw gazed around the clearing, surprised by the number of cats present in the camp. Normally, there would be several patrols out.

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey join me beneath Shade Rock for a clan meeting!"

Lakestar's yowl caused her to jump in surprise. She shook her ears before racing over to where Cherrypaw was seated, her golden-brown ears pricked eagerly.

"Maybe it's about the battle!" Cherrypaw whispered in her ear as she settled down.

"Beetlepelt told me it's Runningpaw's warrior ceremony," she mewed quietly.

"Oh." Cherrypaw's whiskers drooped a little.

Finally, the last cats gathered, which included Strawpaw, who quickly sat down on Acornpaw's opposite flank.

"Cherrypaw is such an annoying furball," Strawpaw grumbled in her ear.

She glanced from Strawpaw to Cherypaw. That was when she noticed that each of their pelts' was bristling slightly.

"What happened?" She whispered.

"I'll tell you after," he mewed, glancing up as Lakestar began to speak.

"By the day, ThunderClan has been growing more hostile!" Lakestar's voice rose in anger. "They have pushed their limits at our border! They waltz into our territory and attack innocent warriors. I

mean, what can you expect from a band of squirrel cats that live in a bunch of brambles?"

Several yowls of anger met her words. Lakestar waited for them to die down before continuing on.

"This is why we need more warriors! And today, I'll give you one."

Lakestar nodded down to Runningpaw.

His sage-green eyes were sharp and clear, while his long ginger pelt flowed around him like a cloud. His chin was lifted proudly, and his fluffy tail stuck up directly in the air.

"Runningpaw, please step forward."

As he stepped closer to the Shade Rock, Lakestar began the ceremonial words.

"I, Lakestar, leader of ShadowClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. He has trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend him to you as a warrior in his turn."

Lakestar gazed directly down at Runningpaw, her eyes blazing with a startling depth.

"Runningpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your Clan, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do," he said without hesitation.

"Then by the powers of StarClan, I give you your warrior name. Runningpaw, from this moment on you will be known as Runningheart. StarClan honors your strength and commitment, and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan."

Lakestar leaped down the Shade Rock before resting her muzzle on Runningheart's head, while he licked her shoulder. As soon as the ceremony was finished, the clan erupted into cheers.

"Runningheart! Runningheart! Runningheart!"

Acornpaw joined in, watching as the newly named warrior puffed out his chest.

That'll be me someday, she thought.

As the clan began to break up, Lakestar cleared her throat loudly, causing cats to halt in their tracks.

"There is one final announcement I must make before this meeting ends," she called.

Acornpaw quickly settled down again, pricking her ears.

"After careful discussion, I have decided that we will strike back ThunderClan, but we shall bring the battle *directly* into their camp."

Acornpaw felt dizzy.

My first real *battle.*

As hisses of excitement filled the air, Lakestar raised her tail as a signal for silence once again.

"*However*," she continued on sharply. "This will not be until another three moons when Leaf-bare's frosts have thawed and Newleaf has begun to bloom. So until then, prepare."

As soon as Lakestar finished speaking, the clan split up to discuss the news.

Cherrypaw immediately turned to Acornpaw, her claws flexing impatiently.

"*Three* whole moons?" She hissed. "That's forever! Why can't we just battle now?"

Acornpaw just shrugged, still remembering Lakestar's words from when she had overheard the leader and the deputy. Lakestar wanted to strike back immediately, yet Goldpelt advised her that it was wiser to wait, as the clan had been weakened.

"Can we talk now?" Strawpaw muttered in her ear.

Acornpaw blinked before she nodded and followed her brother toward the edge of the clearing, next to several holly bushes that formed a section of the barrier of the camp. Strawpaw sat down, his cobalt eyes flickering with annoyance and his tail twitching with irritability.

"Cherrypaw *never* listens to me," Strawpaw began. "She'll always start unnecessary arguments because she always believes that she's right and I'm wrong! Well, I know I'm not right *all* the time. Still, I'll try to tell her how a battle can be dangerous and cats can die, like Sleetpath, and she just won't listen! Or I'll just be talking about something and then she'll completely change the subject and start going on about how great she is at fighting or whatever! Sometimes I wonder why I even bother talking to her."

Acornpaw flattened her ears.

And he thinks I can fix all of this?!

"Why is it that *I* always have to be the buffer between the two of you?" She hissed, exhaling slowly from the anger beginning to bubble in her chest. "I can't fix everything! Maybe you should learn to take matters into your own paws and talk to her yourself!"

Strawpaw glared down at his paws.

"But that's the problem. She won't listen! That's exactly what happened when I tried to talk to her about it before the meeting!"

Her eyes narrowed.

"And you think she'll listen to me?"

Strawpaw shrugged half-heartedly.

"I don't know! Maybe, because you two were always the closest out of the three of us."

Acornpaw just lashed her tail mutinously. *It's not my fault Cherrypaw won't listen to him. It's the way she is. She was never one for listening. I can't just change her by talking to her once!*

"I think you just need to try talking to her yourself. This isn't my problem. It's yours. So deal with it," she said stubbornly.

Strawpaw stood up, his glare now directed straight into her face.

"You were always the reasonable one. I just thought you would be more helpful," he snapped, before storming away.

No! You're just being petty and unreasonable! She wanted to yowl back but continued to keep her jaws firmly shut.

Acornpaw watched her brother leave, her expression tight and her chin set defiantly.

If I'm supposedly the reasonable one, then he should see the truth in my words!

"Acornpaw."

She jolted, turning to look at who had spoken. It was Beetlepelt, and his eyes were narrowed.

Did he overhear us? She swallowed hard.

"You shouldn't fight with your siblings," he told her. "You're lucky to even have ones so close. Perhaps see some truth in his words. If Cherrypaw won't listen to Strawpaw, then you should help him out to prevent more arguments from spiraling on. Wouldn't that be wise?"

She let out a small huff. *This isn't any of his business. Just because he's my mentor doesn't mean he can go stick his nose in everything I do!*

When Acornpaw refused to respond, Beetlepelt continued speaking.

"Runningheart and I had a lot of arguments in the past. We only made up for them recently, but we stayed distant from each other for a long time," he went on. "Don't let petty squabbles keep you apart. So, even if it's not your problem, it may be in the future. So help out."

She glared down at her paws, although not wanting to admit that

there was truth in his words. She scraped her claws mutinously across the dirt.

Why does he have to act so wise all of the time? Just because he's five moons older and my mentor doesn't mean anything!

"I hope you'll apologize later to Strawpaw and help out with Cherrypaw. But instead of sitting here staring at the ground, let's make ourselves useful and go on that border patrol I talked about earlier," he said with a sigh, breaking her out of her thoughts. "I'll ask Goldpelt about that now."

She trailed after Beetlepelt, stopping a tail-length away as he approached the deputy, who was congratulating Runningheart and was about to send the tom off to his vigil presumably.

Eventually, once her mentor finished speaking with the deputy, he gathered a patrol. Honeypelt, Chaffinchflare, and Strawpaw would be going on the patrol, much to her disappointment that she would have to face her brother again after their quarrel from moments ago.

Beetlepelt led the patrol out of camp, with Acornpaw trailing at the back about a tail-length behind Strawpaw. The evening had transformed into nighttime, with Leaf-bare's cold more prevalent as the sun slept below the horizon. Acornpaw fluffed up her pelt against the chill, shivering slightly as frost crackled beneath her paws.

The patrol stayed low and hidden, creeping among the darkest of shadows gathered across the forest floor, rounding the ThunderClan border. Remembering her training, she laid her ears flat against her head to avoid making a silhouette.

Eventually, the tall and spindly trunks of the pines gradually became more spaced out from each other, indicating they were nearing the clearing that bordered the Thunderpath. Although the night was dark and silent, it was occasionally interrupted by the flash of piercing lights and the roar of a monster as they raced down the strange Twoleg surface. However, there were far fewer than normal. She assumed that most of the monsters were asleep at

this time.

She held back a gag as a sudden strong and unpleasant scent wreathed through her mouth. The flash of eyes in the darkness was marred with disgust, and it seemed that she was not the only one who had noticed the stench.

"*ThunderClan*," Honeypelt hissed.

Beetlepelt raised his tail as a signal to halt, his posture poised as he observed the surroundings. Acornpaw's ears were pricked, tense, and alert as if a ThunderClan patrol would burst out of the bushes at any given moment. The scent was strong and fresh. They had passed through recently.

"We should check the edge of the Thunderpath," Chaffinchflare muttered quietly, after a long, still moment of silence.

Beetlepelt agreed with a curt nod, and the patrol slipped their way toward the snaking black path. Not a single monster broke its stillness, and the strange stone continued to sit there eerily.

They stopped once again. As the patrol split up to investigate, Acornpaw crept past Strawpaw, trying to make sense of the overload of smells.

So obviously, ThunderClan came from their territory and went across the Thunderpath and went directly into our territory, she thought, attempting to sort the scent trails out.

But then, why would they trespass on ShadowClan land and only stay near the Thunderpath?

Brows furrowed, she circled the area, frustration rising in her chest. She knew ThunderClan held a grudge against ShadowClan. They wanted to boast their victory over the border skirmish. So then why wouldn't they just head deeper into the territory and steal prey or something? What would they want here?

She glanced around, searching for Beetlepelt. A few tail-lengths away her mentor stood; an equally puzzled expression on his face.

"I don't understand," she whispered, creeping over to him. "Why is the ThunderClan scent only right by the Thunderpath?"

"They've made a scent line across the side of the Thunderpath. I believe it's a territory marking," he said. "The only thing that doesn't make sense is why they haven't put the territory markings around the clearing. That's where we fought two sunrises ago, so wouldn't they simply claim a portion of our land?"

Beetlepelt huffed quietly.

"ThunderClan cats, they make no sense whatsoever."

"I've figured it out," came Chaffinchflare's voice, his sage eyes appearing out of the darkness. Strawpaw was at his flank, with bristled fur and a round gaze.

Beetlepelt tilted his head at Chaffinchflare.

"They're claiming the entire Thunderpath. Seasons ago it was agreed that the Thunderpath was not a part of anyone's territory; it was simply a buffer between land; a clear border. So-"

Beetlepelt's ears shot up.

"That means they know about the tunnel! And they're claiming it!" Beetlepelt hissed, his eyes growing wide with horror.

A shock like a river of ice-cold water hit her. ShadowClan has known of the tunnel ever since the Thunderpath had first been built. For all those moons it existed, ThunderClan had always been completely unsuspecting to ShadowClan's use of it.

How is it possible that ThunderClan knows about it now?

Honeypelt had reappeared now, clearly hearing Beetlepelt's outburst. His ears were lying flat against his head, and his claws were unsheathed, highlighted by only a pinprick of light in the almost completely pitch-black night.

"We need to check the tunnel now," said Honeypelt, his voice sharp with anger. "Sure enough there'll be ThunderClan scent down

there."

With his words, the patrol turned and padded quickly toward the entrance. She kept close to Strawpaw's flank, their quarrel now to the very back of her mind as a new fear swamped through her.

Following Beetlepelt's and Chaffinchflare's lead, she brushed her way through the bushes packed closely together at the entrance to the tunnel. Immediately, her vision was obscured by the long shadows turning the tunnel into utter darkness. Now, she could only use her whiskers and nose to guide her.

She expected a rush of ThunderClan scent to greet her nose but instead was only met by the acrid smell of the Thunderpath lingering unpleasantly in the air.

"I don't smell ThunderClan," Honeypelt said, his voice echoing oddly.

"Right," Beetlepelt agreed after a moment. "I may have been wrong."

There was some more shuffling around as they searched for scents. Acornpaw just stayed at Strawpaw's side, unwilling to go further in the darkness. She couldn't shake away the gnawing fear and strange feeling that something or *someone* was lurking in the tunnel. An unwanted presence. The more they waited, the more rapidly her heart started beating. At any moment it felt as if it would burst out of her chest.

"Let's leave," said Chaffinchflare. "It's clear that ThunderClan wasn't here."

More than eager to escape the suffocating darkness, she quickly hurried out, still staying as close as possible to Strawpaw's flank. She noticed that there was a fear scent coming off of Strawpaw.

Did he get that strange feeling too?

As soon as the entire patrol was back together outside the Thunderpath, Beetlepelt gave the signal to head back to camp.

Every hair on her pelt was prickling. It took each drop of strength

in her body to not look behind her.

"Something felt strange in that tunnel," Strawpaw muttered as they padded through the shadowed trees, heading up a small slope. His fur was on end.

Relief surged through her chest. Hearing someone speak her worries out loud was comforting.

"Yes," Acornpaw agreed, her voice quivering. "It was almost as if something was there."

Strawpaw was silent for a long moment. Then he finally spoke.

"I don't like this whole frog-brained argument thing," he whispered. "What if we and Cherrypaw weren't looking out for each other because we were mad at each other and then something bad happened?"

But you were the one who started this argument, she snapped in her head, but she was too frightened to start arguing again.

"I want to just forget this whole thing, but Cherrypaw is still mad at me," he went on. "And, you know, she still never listens to me..."

Did you forget about when you called me unreasonable?

"How about we both talk to her and figure it out," she sighed.

"Good idea," Strawpaw agreed quickly.

Once the patrol reached the section of the forest closest to camp, the feeling of being watched finally faded away.

Eventually, they reached the camp. The chilly air seemed to have caused almost the entire clan to retreat to their nests. Although ShadowClan cats usually performed most of their duties at night, the Leaf-bare cold had caused the clan to resort to doing most patrolling during the day.

Goldpelt seemed to be the only cat that was still up. He was clearly anticipating the patrol's return, as his ears immediately pricked up

and his head turned in their direction.

Beetlepelt dipped his head respectfully to the deputy as they approached, stopping in front of the rocks.

"Anything to report?" Goldpelt asked.

"Yes, lots," Honeypelt rumbled before Beetlepelt had a chance to respond.

"ThunderClan scent was found all over the Thunderpath and right next to it on *our* side of the border," Beetlepelt told Goldpelt, his tail flicking.

"It's very strange. It's as if ThunderClan is trying to claim the Thunderpath as their own," Chaffinchflare added.

"Because of that, we thought ThunderClan had found the tunnel," Beetlepelt went on. "But when we checked there was no scent."

"How odd..." Goldpelt mused. "Well, I've been informed by Lakestar that we will not take any action against ThunderClan before the battle in Newleaf *unless* they set markings past the clearing."

"I'll still discuss this with Lakestar," the deputy added.

Beetlepelt nodded. With that, the patrol turned and split away.

"You two can get something *small* from the fresh-kill pile if you wish," came the gruff tone of Chaffinchflare as he padded up to her and Strawpaw.

Acornpaw felt far from hungry. All she wanted to do was get the talk with Cherrypaw over with and retire to her nest.

"Eat mindfully. It's Leaf-bare," he told them before padding off.

As soon as Chaffinchflare left, Acornpaw turned to Strawpaw.

"I'm not even hungry," she sighed.

Strawpaw's stomach grumbled loudly. His ears flattened with

embarrassment and he shuffled his paws across the dirt.

"I can tell who *is* hungry though," she said, a slight purr bubbling in her chest.

"I'm not hungry though," Strawpaw protested.

She furrowed her brows, her purr dying away.

"It's okay to be hungry. Chaffinchflare said you could eat," Acornpaw mewed, frowning.

"He said it's Leaf-bare and to eat mindfully. There are cats that need food more than me, like Drystreak," he said stubbornly.

"I don't think you're doing the clan any good by starving yourself," she argued. "Also, you're just wasting food. There is still prey in the pile that is warm. By morning no one will want to eat it because it'll be all frozen. So why not eat now?"

"Fine," Strawpaw finally muttered, trudging over to the fresh-kill pile.

Acornpaw followed him and waited, watching intently to make sure he ate his food. Thankfully, as soon as he bit into a rather scrawny mouse he had found, he gobbled it down hungrily, clearly realizing how famished he was.

As soon as he finished cleaning his whiskers after his meal, she gave him a nudge.

"Let's go see if Cherrypaw is still awake," she said.

Together, they padded toward the apprentice's den, padding inside. She blinked rapidly, adjusting to the much darker area before she could finally make out the outline of Cherrypaw, curled peacefully in her nest.

"She's asleep," Strawpaw grumbled.

"Oh well, guess we'll just have to wait until morning," she said, although secretly cheerful. As she padded toward her nest,

Cherrypaw suddenly blinked open her eyes.

Fox-dung to her light sleeping.

"What's going on?" She asked, her jaws gaping open into a giant yawn.

"We were wondering if we could talk to you," said Strawpaw, turning to face her.

Cherrypaw narrowed her eyes.

"Fine, but it's too stuffy in here. Let's go to the clearing."

The trio padded outside of the den. Acornpaw found her eyelids drooping with weariness as they settled near the entrance to the den.

As soon as they sat down, no one uttered a word. Growing irritated by the silence, Acornpaw spoke.

"Strawpaw is upset because you hardly ever listen to him. He said he tried to talk to you but it just ended up in an argument with *neither* of you listening to each other."

Cherrypaw lashed her tail.

"I do listen! Maybe it's kind of boring hearing him yammer on about how dangerous battles are even though he's hardly been in one!"

Acornpaw glanced at Strawpaw. Anger was sparking in his eyes.

"I'm only trying to tell you that they're dangerous because you keep saying how cool fighting is and stuff like that when cats can die!"

"You're just being dramatic," Cherrypaw hissed.

Acornpaw flattened her ears.

"Both of you, shut up for just a moment!" She snapped.

They both went silent, although tails were still lashing and eyes were flashing angrily.

"I think both of you *do* listen to each other. The problem is that you don't *agree* with each other. And that's perfectly fine," she said, trying to keep her voice as calm and smooth as possible. "So in conclusion, the best solution is to not talk to each other about the battle. Don't you think that's a good idea?"

Strawpaw nodded quickly, looking eager to have an end to the argument. Cherrypaw, on the other hand, looked as if she wanted to protest but instead nodded along sullenly.

"Great," Acornpaw sighed. "Now why don't you say sorry to each other and then we can go to sleep?"

"Sorry for what? I wasn't doing anything wrong," Cherrypaw snapped, glaring ahead.

"It doesn't matter. Just say sorry to each other like you mean it," Acornpaw said firmly.

"You sound like Drystreak," Cherrypaw muttered but turned to Strawpaw anyway. "Sorry, Strawpaw."

"Sorry, Cherrypaw."

Finally, feeling satisfied and with the argument resolved, she rose to her paws and stretched. Strawpaw and Cherrypaw had already hurried back inside the den. As she began to follow them inside as well, she couldn't help but feel a strange sensation boring into her back. Like a pair of eyes watching her from the woods.

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Chapter Nine

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The past three moons had passed quickly, like the ripple of a raindrop on a pool of water. Her training was a familiar routine of battle practice early in the morning, with the rest of the day consisting of hunting or border patrols. At the same time, the warriors worked on sharpening their skills in fighting, ultimately preparing for the battle just as Lakestar had ordered. And now, finally, Newleaf was in full bloom, the marshes overflowing with prey from the steady rain starting as the warmer seasons began. Acornpaw was for once given a taste of warmth in the air as the bitter cold of Leaf-bare finally faded into the past.

Acornpaw was padding toward the nursery, along with Strawpaw and Cherrypaw. Drystreak had given birth to her kits in the afternoon of that day to a litter of five kits.

"She won't mind if we see them? What if we crowd her?" Strawpaw was asking Fernfur anxiously, who was settled at the entrance of the den.

"Drystreak said all three of you can see them," Fernfur replied with a light purr, his eyes gleaming. "You can also help pick out names if you want. There's a lot of them."

Acornpaw purred along before padding into the den, following Cherrypaw with Strawpaw just at her heels.

She had to duck as she entered. She had grown quite a bit since she had first become an apprentice. Although she was not the largest of cats, still, her muscles had begun to fill out from the constant training, losing the kit-like lankiness to them. Strawpaw and Cherrypaw were beginning to grow into their more warrior-like build themselves, with broader muzzles, larger paws, and powerful

legs.

Drystreak was curled in her nest, her long plumy tail hanging slightly out of her nest. Her eyelids were drooping with exhaustion, her copper eyes glinting slightly under. But as soon as the apprentices entered the den, she opened her eyes completely, although still clearly worn out.

"Meet your new siblings," she purred, nodding down at the five tiny bundles of fur sleeping peacefully against Drystreak's belly.

"They're so cute!" Acornpaw mewed, while Strawpaw let out an '*awww!*'.

"Wow! They're so tiny!" Cherrypaw exclaimed. "Have you named any of them yet?"

Cherrypaw was shuffling her paws on the ground. She clearly was looking forward to naming one of them.

"Fernfur has already named one of them," Drystreak told her. She gently nosed a brown-gold kit with faint tabby stripes, her eyes affectionate. "His name is Luckkit. He's the only tom of the litter."

"Fitting," Acornpaw mused. "He really is lucky. He has an entire patrol of sisters to defend him!"

Drystreak chuckled.

"He very much is, although I suspect his father will be the first at his side. They're only an entire *afternoon* old and Fernfur is already obsessed with little Luckkit." Drystreak rolled her eyes, yet there was a hint of fondness lingering in her expression.

Acornpaw studied the kits as she fell into silence. Besides Luckkit the litter consisted of a smoky gray she-kit, a fluffy silver and white she-kit, a gold tabby she-kit, and finally a fluffy brown-gold tabby she-kit.

"You can each name one kit," Drystreak told them.

As she, Strawpaw, and Cherrypaw fell into a silence, brows

furrowed as they thought of a name, Drystreak spoke again.

"And I just thought of a perfect name for one of my little darlings," she purred.

She then gave the gold tabby a very light tap with the tail.

"This one will be Amberkit, for her perfect pelt like a gold teardrop," she said, her eyes glimmering as she gazed down at the sleeping kitten.

The other kits began to wriggle, disturbed by the noise. Drystreak quickly began to clean each of their pelts', nudging them closer to the warmth of her belly before they finally began to settle, their squeaks dying down into soft, rumbling purrs.

"I know a good name," Strawpaw said quietly so he wouldn't rouse the kittens again.

"How about the smoky gray kit can be Firkit? So cats from other clans will know she's a ShadowClan cat?"

Drystreak nodded encouragingly.

"I like it. It's a pretty name. Thank you," she said to him.

"Ooh! I know! That silver and white one!" Cherrypaw suddenly exclaimed, earning a small hiss from Drystreak to keep quiet. Cherrypaw flattened her ears but lowered her voice to a whisper anyway.

"She can be Flurrykit because her pelt looks like a flurry of snow," Cherrypaw said matter-of-factly.

"I like it," Drystreak repeated. "Acornpaw?"

"Ummm." Her mind was swirling through countless possibilities. It was an honor to name another cat, yet at the same time, she bore a great weight of expectations. This kit would bear this name for the rest of her life. She *couldn't* give her a stupid name.

"How about...Prancekit?" She offered finally, still uncertain. But as

soon as the words left her mouth, she immediately regretted it. She had no idea what her personality would be, so how would she know if Prancekit was the kind of cat to prance around? Her personality could be the complete, polar opposite of her name!

"Thank you," Drystreak purred, breaking her out of her thoughts. "Luckkit, Amberkit, Firkit, Flurrykit, and Prancekit. They're perfect!"

"I think you should rest, Drystreak," Pigeonsilk said sternly from nearby. "You have a pawful of a litter to deal with, and you need as much energy as you can get."

He gave a curt nod to the three apprentices.

"Off you three go," he said.

They turned and trudged out of the den. As soon as they left the entrance, Cherrypaw turned to them, her eyes sparkling.

"Question! Which kit is your favorite?" Cherrypaw meowed. "I'll go first. I like Flurrykit!"

"But you're just picking the one you named! Plus, we don't even know their personalities yet!" Acornpaw protested.

"Flurrykit would've been my favorite whether I named her or not," Cherrypaw said stubbornly. "And who cares about personality? We can just pick based on pelt colors."

Acornpaw rolled her eyes.

"Well then, mine is Prancekit," she snapped.

"Firkit for me," Strawpaw piped in.

Finally seeing the truth in Acornpaw's words, Cherrypaw just huffed before she continued speaking.

"I hope we get to mentor them because by the time we're warriors they'll be apprentices! In fact, we'll have been warriors for three moons," she mewed, her excitement returning.

"Me too," Strawpaw agreed. "Surely Lakestar will give at least one of them to us? There aren't a lot of warriors, and some of them have already mentored recently."

"Oh, and Chaffinchflare will be retiring as soon as I become a warrior," he added.

"*If* Lakestar even lets us," Acornpaw pointed out with a flick of her tail. "We're their kin after all. Our fondness of them may be the only reason they get their warrior names."

"Stop being such a downer. It's not a crime to hope," Cherrypaw snapped.

When Acornpaw flattened her ears, Strawpaw spoke as if he was trying to turn both of their attention away from the argument beginning to rise.

"Runningheart and Beetlepelt are both Chaffinchflare's adopted kits, and Chaffinchflare was Beetlepelt's mentor," Strawpaw said quickly. "So perhaps Lakestar doesn't care about kinship when it comes to mentoring."

Cherrypaw nodded eagerly in agreement, shooting a look at Acornpaw out of the corner of her eye. She just nodded along sullenly, avoiding Cherrypaw's gaze and keeping her temper tightly under control.

Fine, then I'll prove that I'm more mature than Cherrypaw and I know when to stay silent, she thought determinedly, with a warm hint of irritation still running through her veins.

"Cherrypaw, Strawpaw, and Acornpaw," came Goldpelt's voice as the long-furred tom padded over to the trio, his golden eyes an amber shade as the sun's fading hues gave only a small prick of light in their depths. At each of his flanks were Chaffinchflare and Beetlepelt.

"Lakestar wants all of the mentors together so we can assess your progress," the deputy told them.

"This late?" Cherrypaw asked with a loud sigh.

Chaffinchflare turned a stern glare onto the tabby. Acornpaw immediately recalled her first day out of camp with her littermates, when Chaffinchflare scolded Cherrypaw for being too loud. However this time, Cherrypaw seemed a little more apologetic and quickly flattened her ears, looking down at her paws.

"If you do not know already, ShadowClan cats are more suited for night-time," Goldpelt said drily. "Lakestar would like us to assess your stalking techniques to see how capable you three are at being sneaky. You know, living up to ShadowClan's name."

Acornpaw flexed her claws eagerly. This would be a great opportunity to prove her worth in her stalking skills. Every assessment brought her closer to earning her warrior's name.

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey join me beneath Shade Rock for a clan meeting!"

Goldpelt flattened his ears.

"She told me she would be calling the clan meeting later," he muttered. "Well then, forget about the assessment."

Acornpaw glanced toward the Shade Rock. Lakestar's tall, learn form was perched on the top of it, the evening sunlight turning her silver-white fur into a pale yellow hue.

Her heart suddenly leaped in her chest.

Is this about the battle? It's Newleaf now, after all.

She settled down with Cherrypaw and Strawpaw, mud splashing over her legs from the recent rain. When Newleaf's first rains started, she had hated the feeling of mud sticking into her fur. But now that she had spent more time in the marshes hunting and splashing around in the puddles, she had grown used to the slimy feeling of mud drenching her belly and plastering over her paws.

By the time Lakestar began the meeting, about the entire clan was gathered. Only one or two cats seemed to be out on patrol.

"Clanmates, the moment you have been waiting for has finally

arrived," Lakestar drawled, her voice slow and ominous.

A chill ran from her claws all the way to her ear-tips, a mixture of fear and a growing anticipation. This would be *nothing* like the skirmish at the border moons ago. It would be taken *directly* into ThunderClan's camp.

"The frosts have finally thawed, and the air has become fresh and warm. But most importantly, ShadowClan has strengthened. I have observed many battle practices over these three moons, and I can assure you that the clan is more than ready."

Acornpaw sat up straighter as she felt the tense energy crackle through the clan. Each cat bore the weight of knowing what would happen tomorrow.

"I have given you the last of today to prepare. Tomorrow, before the battle begins, I'll announce the plan. So I'd like my mediators, medicine cats, Goldpelt, and Chaffinchflare to stay with me and discuss the battle. The rest of the clan is dismissed. "

Lakestar leaped off of her perch and sat down below the Shade Rock, while the said cats gathered around her.

Acornpaw immediately turned to her littermates.

"We're finally having the battle," she said, clawing at the muddy ground.

Cherrypaw was circling restlessly, her eyes gleaming with an overwhelming amount of excitement. Strawpaw just sat between them, looking sick.

Beetlepelt padded over to the three apprentices.

"Just as Lakestar said, this would be a great opportunity to do plenty of battle training," he told them in his smooth voice. "I'm taking charge of the three of you for now."

With that, he flicked his tail as a signal to follow. As they headed toward the training grounds, Cherrypaw gave an enthusiastic leap in the air, earning a stern look from Beetlepelt.

Once they crossed the stream and settled in the stalks of grass dotting the clearing, he spoke.

"Fighting inside an enemy's camp is a dangerous move," Beetlepelt told them, his eyes taking on a more grave note. "When a cat is in their most vulnerable position, their fighting can be much more intense. In these kinds of battles, it's likely for you to be facing more than one opponent at once."

Acornpaw shivered. The looming prospect of battle suddenly seemed far more dangerous than she had anticipated. Now, she was beginning to feel uncertain about her skills in fighting. She had only been an apprentice for four moons. Was she really capable?

"Right. I have a perfect technique if you are having to fight more than one cat at once," said Beetlepelt, breaking her out of her thoughts. He gestured with his tail for the three of them to head over to a more open spot with less grass.

"Strawpaw, you're up first," Beetlepelt said cheerfully.

Strawpaw's eyes went round.

"But I don't—"

Beetlepelt cut him off as he shouldered him to one area before nudging her and Cherrypaw to face each of his sides.

"Acornpaw, Cherrypaw, act like angry ThunderClan warriors that are about to attack him," he said with a nod.

She quickly bushed out her pelt, drawing her lips back in the fiercest snarl she could muster.

Cherrypaw, on the other claw, looked just as menacing, with her pelt bristled and her eyes slit.

"Now Strawpaw, what is your first move in this situation?" Beetlepelt asked. Acornpaw noticed that there was a slight hint of amusement glimmering in his eyes.

"Uhh..." Strawpaw's eyes darted from Cherrypaw to Acornpaw.

"Pick someone to attack?" He offered finally, his voice wavering with uncertainty.

"That can work," Beetlepelt said after a brief pause. "But the best thing you want to do is try to separate them. You really can't hold off on your own against two opponents, unless you are somehow insanely strong."

"Right Strawpaw, you have to be *insanely* strong to fight off *both* of us," Cherrypaw snickered.

"I don't even think I *have* to be strong to fight off both of you," he shot back with a playful growl.

"Hey. You have a *battle* tomorrow. Did you forget?" Beetlepelt swept a stern glare over Strawpaw and Cherrypaw.

"No," they both muttered, yet she could still see a flicker of playfulness dancing in Cherrypaw's gaze.

"Right. So back to what I was saying, how do you think you can separate your opponents?"

When an idea sparked in her mind, Acornpaw offered, "What about using your environment to your advantage?"

Beetlepelt tilted his head.

"What do you mean by that?"

"Well, like..." she scratched her claw absently on the dirt. "Like climbing trees? Or hiding in places and ambushing?"

"Hmmm, I see what you mean," he mused. "But in tomorrow's battle, we will be in ThunderClan's camp, so unless they have trees growing in their camp that won't be possible. Hiding and ambushing won't work either, because we are on the enemy's ground and don't know the terrain."

Acornpaw nodded, trying to shake away the embarrassment heating her ears.

When everyone was silent, Beetlepelt just shook his head.

"Well, since none of you can think of what to do, why don't we begin with Cherrypaw and Acornpaw attacking Strawpaw? Sometimes it's better to learn in action."

Cherrypaw seemed to be more than ready for Beetlepelt to give the order. She sprang at Strawpaw, yowling like a crazed fox. Acornpaw stood for half a second, still processing, before quickly leaping after Cherrypaw, pinning Strawpaw's hindquarters while Cherrypaw kept his frontside on the ground. Strawpaw squirmed beneath them, kicking and lashing.

Eventually, Strawpaw was able to wriggle out from beneath them. As soon as he was on his paws, he turned and began sprinting away.

"But he can't just run away from a fight!" Cherrypaw protested, lashing her tail. Then, in a much louder voice, she yowled, "Cheater!"

But Strawpaw was already turning back.

"Leap at him! I'll be at his other flank!" Acornpaw yowled to Cherrypaw as he drew closer.

Acornpaw quickly raced over to the area across from Cherrypaw. They both tensed their muscles, preparing.

Finally, Strawpaw was close enough, his pelt a golden streak of fur flying toward them. As Cherrypaw sprang at him, he suddenly ducked and slid across the ground, sending her sailing over his head.

Acornpaw was unable to see what had happened to Cherrypaw as Strawpaw barreled directly into her, his force throwing her several tail-lengths across the ground.

"Alright, that's enough." Beetlepelt's voice cut across them. Although his whiskers were twitching, his eyes were gleaming with satisfaction.

As she stumbled to her paws, trying to regain a sense of balance as

she swayed a little with dizziness, Beetlepelt padded over to them.

"Strawpaw, that was some excellent thinking," he began.

Strawpaw licked his chest fur in embarrassment, but his eyes were glowing with pride.

"You were able to figure out your enemy's tactic so you could fail them, which is exactly what you should do when facing more than one opponent. You found out that Cherrypaw would tackle you as soon as you ran by, so you ducked. That stunned her temporarily, and using that time you were able to take down Acornpaw," he said.

"He was cheating though," Cherrypaw broke in, lashing her tail. "Running away from the fight is unfair. And also, won't the battle tomorrow be really crowded? It won't be possible to do that!"

"Yeah, that's true," said Beetlepelt. "And we *will* find a good technique to use if this happens at the battle. However, the point of this practice was so you could learn that figuring out your opponent's tactic can help you take them down."

"Now Strawpaw, let's be more realistic," he continued. " Although running away then coming back was smart, that clearly won't be happening tomorrow. Just as Cherrypaw said, the camp will be *crowded.* So let's practice good tactics for more tight-spaced fighting."

From there, the four of them spent the remainder of the evening and some of dusk practicing their fighting skills. Even though she could hardly stay awake any longer towards the end of the practice, the fizzing energy in her stomach did not leave. The battle was nearing, and it would either end in victory or disaster.

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Chapter Ten

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Acornpaw paced the clearing impatiently, her stomach roiling with an overwhelming load of fear and excitement. She felt as if she had been shoved under the surface of a dark pool of water, unable to reach the surface as claws held her down, the mounting feelings in her lungs as strong as the need for oxygen. She couldn't breathe until she broke free.

"You ready?"

Acornpaw halted abruptly in the tracks of her pacing and looked up as Beetlepelt approached. His eyes were gleaming and his tail seemed to be twitching restlessly.

"I'm in between," she confessed, digging her claws into the ground. "I'm worried I might somehow forget all of my battle training during it. Or I..."

She trailed off, shaking her head.

Don't infect others' minds with worries! Remember what Drystreak said: it's better to keep it to yourself, an inner voice told her sharply.

"I promise you, that won't happen," he said, his voice reassuring as he sat down. "It's not possible to forget something that you've been practicing for moons. It's indented in your mind. Just don't overthink and try to stay calm."

Acornpaw nodded, letting his words seep through her mind.

When there was a pause as the two of them sank into their own thoughts, Acornpaw spoke to break the silence.

"Have you talked to Goldpelt? Do you know if all of the patrols are

back yet?" She asked, her claws flexing with impatience.

"No, I haven't. But it looks like about everyone has returned. Lakestar should make an announcement at some point soon," he said with a shrug.

He was right. As she glanced around, it seemed as if the entire clan was milling around the clearing, evidently just as impatient for the battle as she felt.

Why can't it just happen already?

It appeared to be that Lakestar was in no hurry to start announcements. So she decided to find a way to pass the time.

"I'm going to see Drystreak," she said with a sigh, getting to her paws and padding toward the nursery.

Although they were only a day old, they were very vocal. Several times she had passed by the nursery she could hear their loud, demanding mewls. Not only that but they were usually accompanied by Drystreak's huge sighs.

As she peeked her head through the entrance, she was surprised to find that Drystreak was the only cat present in the nursery. Even Fernfur, who had been anxiously checking on the kits throughout the day yesterday and today, was gone.

However, Drystreak seemed peaceful, sleeping comfortably. Her five kits were curled up against the long and soft fur of her stomach, their tiny bodies breathing steadily as they napped.

I'll leave her alone. She's probably enjoying the quiet without Fernfur and the medicine cats and the queens constantly nagging her.

As she was backing away, a loud and commanding yowl shook the camp.

Acornpaw's stomach gave a nauseating jolt as she realized who it was, somewhere between eagerness and dread.

Finally! Lakestar!

Her heart began to race in a frenzy. She turned and darted toward the center of the clearing, beneath the Shade Rock.

Just as she was settling down eagerly, casting gleaming eyes upwards at Lakestar's tall form perched on the rock with other cats gathering around her, Cherrypaw came bounding up to her.

"I think it's the battle plan," she hissed, her tail lashing with excitement.

Feeling mischievous, she remarked, "Oh, is it really? I thought it was our warrior ceremonies," Acornpaw said, her voice dripping with sarcasm.

Cherrypaw flattened her ears, a frown appearing on her face as she settled next to her.

Not good with sarcasm, huh?

It only took a few more seconds for the rest of the clan to gather. Strawpaw joined both of the she-cats, his eyes swelling with anxiety while she spotted his mentor, Chaffinchflare, joining Beetlepelt and Runningheart. Two of the newest mediators, Brownsnout and Goldennewt, were both chatting quietly with serious expressions on their faces. Hazyfall sat next to them, and behind the three mediators were Brookdaisy, Pigeonsilk, and Honeypelt. Nearby she and her siblings were Fernfur, and finally, she could see both the medicine cats settled close to the deputy rock.

Eventually, Lakestar began to speak. She noticed with a flash of uncertainty that the leader's ears were pinned back, and her tail was sweeping back and forth across the rock.

"I've already formed a battle plan. The clan *must* cooperate, or we will lose this battle!" Lakestar yowled.

Acornpaw flinched slightly at the edge in her voice. She and her siblings exchanged unsettled looks.

"The plan is simple and impossible to forget, so there should be no excuses," Lakestar snapped. "I will take one large patrol. Once we arrive directly outside the camp, the patrol will be split into two.

The first wave will attack, then the second. Is that clear?"

When cats nodded, Lakestar added, "That's not all. They need to pay, not just with wounds. Steal their prey. Destroy their dens."

There were growls of support, but nothing too eager. Either the clan had caught on to Lakestar's sour mood, or they were remembering what had caused ThunderClan to pay such a price: Sleetpath.

"It's nighttime. Let's go," Lakestar snapped, leaping off her perch. Acornpaw stood, startled, not expecting the announcement to end so quickly.

Cherrypaw and Strawpaw were two polar opposites sitting side-by-side. One's eyes were gleaming with battle lust, while the other's were pools of dread.

"This is it," Strawpaw muttered, staring off into space.

Cherrypaw rolled her eyes.

"Stop being so dramatic," she told him.

"You're one to talk," he flashed back, his eyes sparking with anger.

Acornpaw's ears twitched with surprise. Strawpaw was never this quick to argue.

"Calm down, why waste your energy bickering before the battle has even begun?" Acornpaw said, attempting to soothe their ruffled pelts. But she wasn't very calm herself, as her nerves were fizzing with anxiety.

Cherrypaw just huffed and looked away, while Strawpaw stayed silent.

"I want Chaffinchflare, Honeypelt, Fernfur, Beetlepelt, Runningheart, Brookdaisy, Brownsnout, Goldennewt, Acornpaw, Strawpaw, and Cherrypaw on my patrol! The rest of you stay behind," Lakestar yowled.

"Why is Brookdaisy, Goldennewt, and Brownsnout going? They're

not warriors," came the arguing voice of Honeypelt.

"Well, if you can't already tell, we're a little *short* on warriors," Lakestar said in a venomous voice. "And the three of them have had a bit of some battle training, so they should be fine."

"Why am I not going?" Goldpelt's voice broke in. Although the deputy was always calm and polite, there was a surprising glint of anger in his eyes.

"Guard the camp," she said dismissively.

"As the deputy, I believe I should go," Goldpelt said icily.

Lakestar let out a hiss.

"I don't have time for this. You're acting like a *kit*. I order you to stay and guard the camp, you're not needed on the patrol!" She snarled.

The clan went silent, their shock clear. Eventually, Goldpelt receded, but there was certainly not a satisfied look on his face as Lakestar gathered the patrol and left.

As they trekked silently through the pines, their pelts blending in effortlessly through the shadows, Acornpaw could only have her thoughts to fill the silence.

Why didn't she just let Goldpelt on the patrol? He's not exactly a weak warrior.

All she could do was trust Lakestar's reasoning. She was the leader, after all.

They stopped once to roll in a large pile of mud gathered near the bank of the stream to cover their scents. She shivered in disgust as the slimy texture seeped through her pelt.

Won't ThunderClan think it's suspicious that a bunch of mud is trampling around their territory? She wondered, tail twitching. *From what I've heard ThunderClan's land isn't exactly muddy!*

Beetlepelt had taught her that disguising your scent in something that would be normal to find in the territory you were attacking was most appropriate. It makes it much easier to slip by unnoticed and can make for a successful attack.

Beetlepelt clearly had the same thoughts in his mind. A frown creased his expression, and he was watching Lakestar thoughtfully.

"*And* I just cleaned my pelt," Strawpaw muttered next to her, his muzzle wrinkled in disgust. He was standing with his paws buried in the mud, yet refused to get in it.

Cherrypaw, who was on her opposite side and was practically unrecognizable from how much mud clotted her pelt, exchanged a mischievous look with her. They both had the same thoughts in their minds.

Strawpaw glanced at each of them, his eyes round.

"You're not going to push me in are yo-"

He didn't even get a chance to finish his sentence as she and Cherrypaw rushed forward, giving him a hefty shove into the pile. He fell face-first, mud splattering in his wake.

Strawpaw let out a disgusting cough and slowly gathered himself to his paws, spitting out mud. Cherrypaw and her watched him, purring with laughter.

"You're getting payback. Just wait. Oh, and you might want to sleep with one eye open tonight," Strawpaw spluttered, lashing his tail angrily as he coughed up more mud.

Chaffinchflare shot him a stern glare, a warning to be quiet. Acornpaw fought to keep the laughter under control at Strawpaw's face, now streaked with dirt that gave him the appearance of some sort of mud monster, which was also now angrily glaring at both of them.

Eventually, once everyone was thoroughly drenched in mud, they continued on their way.

Soon enough they reached the entrance of the tunnel beneath the Thunderpath. They paused for a moment before Lakestar gave the signal with a wave of her tail.

Her heart began to hammer in her chest as a bout of nervousness swept through her. The strange, crawling feeling along her spine that she had experienced the last time she was in the tunnels had returned. This time, there was no turning back. Whatever awaited them at the end of the tunnel she would have to face.

Every heartbeat they slunk through the dark, pressing passage, the more and more fear gathered in her stomach. It was to the point where she felt as if her heart might burst out of her chest.

It felt as if eyes were boring directly into her.

Lakestar reached the end of the tunnel.

The oak forest around them was silent and eerie. Acornpaw could feel a little bit of the suffocating fear release from her shoulders as a bit of relief calmed her racing heart. She could see not a single pair of eyes watching her from the forest.

Beetlepelt stopped next to her and glanced at her questioningly. She could see the question as clear as daylight: 'Are you okay?'

She just nodded, trying to smooth her prickling pelt.

Lakestar took the lead again. This time, she stuck close to Beetlepelt, reassured by the occasional brush of his pelt against hers.

The oak forest was by far much different than ShadowClan's pines. The ground underneath was not soothed by piles of pine needles. Not only that, there was also barely room to walk as brambles and other undergrowth crowded the forest floor. Every once in a while her fur would get snagged on the thorns of a bramble, leaving her to curse silently in her head as the patrol was forbidden to speak.

By the time they reached the hollow that marked ThunderClan's camp, she felt as if half of her pelt was missing. Grimacing in pain, she licked at a bloody scratch on her flank.

Lakestar began to quietly split the patrol into two. Honeypelt, Runningheart, Beetlepelt, Brownsnout, Strawpaw, and she was on the first raid. The second patrol was Lakestar, Chaffinchflare, Brookdaisy, Fernfur, Goldennewt, and Cherrypaw.

"The entrance should be over there," Lakestar muttered to Honeypelt, indicating with her tail to an area a few tail-lengths away. "There will be a guard. Move fast before they can alert the clan."

Honeypelt nodded. Just as he was about to gather up the patrol and leave in the direction Lakestar had pointed out, Acornpaw looked back hesitantly at Fernfur. She had expected some sort of good-bye, or good luck from him, but he hadn't uttered a single word to them. Instead, he just stood there with his patrol.

She tried to push the thoughts away, yet she still felt hurt. Did her father not care that much? The more she thought about it, the more that added up. He hadn't even talked to her and her littermates since yesterday.

Her thoughts were interrupted as the overwhelming scent of ThunderClan surged through her nose as soon as Honeypelt found the entrance, more intense than ever.

Honeypelt and Beetlepelt went first. She waited, holding her breath. There was the sound of tussling and a cut-off growl before silence hit them. Then, to her relief, Beetlepelt returned, telling the patrol that it was safe to go.

Honeypelt had pinned the guard against the ground, shoving their muzzle into the dirt.

"You can leave her, she's knocked out cold, by the time she wakes up we'll already be attacking," Beetlepelt said so quietly that it was hardly a whisper. Honeypelt nodded and released his grip, but he looked slightly irritated at the fact that a much younger warrior was bossing him around.

Honeypelt turned to address the patrol.

"We'll start with destroying the warrior's den. That'll wake them up. Then I want you two-" he nodded to her and Strawpaw "-to grab any prey and run out as soon as Lakestar's patrol attacks."

Why can't we stay and fight the whole time? Acornpaw wanted to argue but held her tongue for the fact that it was far too risky to even be talking. She had a feeling that if Cherrypaw was in her place, she would be biting Honeypelt's ears off right now asking why she couldn't stay for the entire battle.

"Where even *is* the warrior's den?" Runningheart whispered, his sage-green eyes studying the sandy grounds of ThunderClan's hollow.

"Who knows? This entire place reeks," Brownsnout muttered grumpily.

"I'd assume it's the largest den there is." Honeypelt began to stealthily creep around the camp. The patrol quickly followed his lead.

Although the ground underneath was sandy, it was mostly clean meaning that she didn't have to worry about stepping on any leaves or twigs that may alert the sleeping clan.

Runningheart tilted his head questioningly over to a fallen log; ferns and brambles patching the ceiling; presumably a den. Beetlepelt shook his head, mouthing: 'too small to be the warrior's den.'

It did not take terribly long to find the warrior's den. It was a large structure made out of brambles. From the entrance, she could see many nests lining the floor and the sleeping bodies of warriors.

By now they were far too close to the warrior's den to risk making any noise, so instead Honeypelt used his tail to signal. He then waved his tail to each of them for a position next to the den. Her heart hammering in her throat, she maneuvered herself next to the den wall, ready for his order to begin destroying it.

"*Now!*"

She flung herself full force at the den wall, which she immediately

regretted. She closed her eyes as thorns dangerously strayed near her eyes, her pelt earning various scratches as thorns raked at her pelt.

The rest of the raid tore into the brambles, clawing and gnawing away at the tightly woven branches.

Acornpaw felt as if her heart might burst out of her chest with fear as she heard loud commotion from inside the den, as well as yowls of terror.

"*ShadowClan!*" A voice shrieked.

"We're under attack!" Another wailed.

"Capture them! There's only a few..."

Acornpaw spun around to meet the warriors rushing into them.

A small tom crashed directly into her, causing her to yelp in pain as she was bowled to the ground. Just before he could lay a claw on her she quickly twisted under him, sending him reeling away with a fierce kick to his stomach.

He retaliated swiftly. As he darted for her, fangs flashing in the low light, she quickly turned before his jaws could inflict a wound. But instead, his teeth met her tail, and a shock of pain jolted through her as he bit down.

Furious with pain, she whipped around and struck his shoulder, blood flying into the air. With a yowl, he released her tail, then sprang for her legs, knocking her across the ground.

She barely had time to defend her face as he pounced on her and aimed a blow directly at her eyes. It missed by a whisker and instead hit her cheek, his claws slicing into her flesh. She writhed in pain, drops of scarlet obscuring her vision.

With less coordination she kicked and lashed at her opponent, desperately defending her exposed belly. Just as he was about to aim another blow to her face, she reached up and locked her claws onto his leg, digging them in. With this, she heaved herself

upwards, before knocking him away.

Breath coming in gasps, she faced him, blood running down her body.

The small tom slowly rose to his paws. His black and white pelt was stained with blood and his eyes were slit with fury.

"You won't beat me so easily, apprentice."

Acornpaw was ready as he lunged at her again. Although exhaustion was creeping in, she let herself crash into him. The pain of the collision sent weird spirals dancing through her vision, but the surprise it gave him was an advantage she had to take quickly. She leaped for him, digging her claws into his shoulders and slashing with the claws on her hind legs.

He began to grow limp beneath her.

An icy river of shock coursed through her.

Did I kill him?

She backed away, staring at her bloodied claws in horror.

What have I done?

It was a trick.

He sprang at her. The force was so powerful that when she hit the ground, her vision went completely blank for a second, her head pounding painfully.

Beetlepelt would be disappointed.

She weakly clawed at him, but the warrior was merciless. All she could do was defend her exposed throat, but even then she was weakening. Her vision had turned red with blood.

I'm going to die.

Perhaps the shriek of pain as he dug her claws into her belly had

alerted him. The weight on top of her had suddenly disappeared.

"Grab a piece of prey if you can and run, Acornpaw," Beeltepelt snarled as he gave a sprawling kick to the warrior she had just been fighting throat-to-throat with, his body flying across the ground.

"But the battle just started," she gasped, her chest heaving as blood ran down her flanks. She forced herself to rise to her paws, knowing that she could not let her guard down when she could get attacked at any given moment.

"*Go*. Lakestar's patrol has been here for a while!"

There was no arguing, especially when Beetlepelt was already facing another cat, his lips peeled back in an aggressive snarl, one so ferocious that it made the fur along her spine prickle. Forcing her battered body to move, she turned and raced over to the fresh-kill pile, which was centered in the middle of their camp, lined by rocks.

Her path was suddenly blocked by an apprentice, a russet tom that looked around the same age as her. She groaned inwardly.

Of course! There's always someone in the way!

Given the moment, a thought crossed her mind: *Is it really worth it to risk my life over some prey? Should I just leave it and run?*

But it was her order to steal a piece of prey. And she had always been a rule follower.

"Forgot how to fight?" The apprentice snickered. A moment later he was flying towards her.

In a heartbeat she ducked, causing him to sail directly over her head. She was already exhausted enough, and to fight him could mean even more severe injuries. So she raced forward, skidding across the ground and almost falling into the prey pile. There was no time to choose the most suitable prey, so she grabbed a rather large squirrel in her jaws. It was an immediate regret. Her neck ached as she turned and darted for the entrance, dodging around the apprentice once again.

He was after her. And she knew very well that she would not be able to escape him with such a heavy mouthful. So just before she reached the entrance, she made a neck-breaking turn and sprinted directly into the midst of the fighting.

Her muscles screamed to stop, but she had no choice.

Milliseconds before she could crash directly into the tussling Brownsnout and a brown tabby, she turned, silently praying to StarClan that Brownsnout would not be harmed by the apprentice's impact.

Without a glance back she rushed to the entrance.

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Every wound stung. Her head was pounding. Her pelt was clumped with dried blood.

As soon as she had escaped the camp, she had run until she felt a safe enough distance. From there, she had curled up in a clump of ferns with her squirrel, taking the time to catch her breath.

The nagging worry for her clanmates had finally led her to get to her paws and set off in a general direction. It didn't take long to find Strawpaw's and Cherrypaw's scent trails, as they had clearly run all over the place in a desperate panic.

"Chaffinchflare told me to go and stay near the tunnel by the Thunderpath. Lakestar is supposed to retreat soon," Cherrypaw was now saying, her eyes as wide as an owl's. Acornpaw was huddled up close to both her littermates, their pile of prey gathered next to them as they waited fearfully for the raiding patrols to retreat.

As they discussed their experiences in the battle, she found that no one, including herself, felt too content about the battle. Although it was not meant to be a win-lose type of battle, as the only goal was to inflict serious harm on ThunderClan, she still found that her heart was hammering in her chest and a sense of unease was lingering in her stomach. Even Cherrypaw, who was normally a ball of energy and enthusiasm, was looking around fearfully with dark

eyes and a fluffed-up pelt.

Relief swelled in her chest when she finally spotted Lakestar shouldering her way through the undergrowth. Behind her, everyone else followed. She immediately relaxed as she saw that everyone was still alive and breathing.

"They didn't bother to chase us out of their territory, not that I'm complaining," Honeypelt said, who was walking alongside Lakestar.

Lakestar hardly twitched a whisker at the tom. Her eyes were slit and looking ahead with a sharp and unsettling look on her face, and a fresh tear ripped through one of her ears. The rest of her pelt was marred with bloody scratches, with blood seeping through the once glossy silver-white coat.

Everyone fell silent, clearly sensing that it would be risky saying anything when Lakestar looked as if she was ready to claw out the ears of anyone willing to merely glance in her direction.

Without a word spoken, Lakestar marched into the tunnel.

She quickly picked up her squirrel in her jaws, steadying her breath and preparing to walk into the darkness once more.

She was more than relieved once they exited. Because she was one of the first ones out, she waited with Lakestar and Chaffinchflare for the rest to follow. She began to absently stare around the forest, turning around to observe her surroundings.

As she turned, she was met with a face that held a burning pair of yellow eyes.

Her shriek of terror shook the entire forest.

She stumbled back, the shock making her feel dizzy. A strange reddish-brown she-cat was looming over her, with the most frightening pair of eyes she had ever seen.

"W-who *are* you?!" She spluttered.

The she-cat let out a chuckle. It wasn't exactly nice-sounding, but it

didn't sound malicious either. But Acornpaw certainly wasn't about to be friendly with the stranger, especially when she had just scared the fur off of her pelt.

"I'm Shell. Sorry about frightening you, I didn't think I'd scare you that badly," she meowed, lowering her head apologetically.

Lakestar, who was watching them, had hardly batted an eye during the entire exchange. There was an annoyed expression creasing her face, yet she didn't utter a single word.

"*Lakestar!* There's a rogue! We need to chase it out!" Honeypelt snarled, bushing out his pelt to twice his size and advancing toward Shell. Brookdaisy quickly joined his side, glaring furiously at Shell.

Shell took a small step back, the fur along her spine flattening.

"I'm not here to hurt anyone," she said, her eyes wide. "I just wanted to ask if I could join ShadowClan."

The cats stared at her in shock.

"I've learned a lot about ShadowClan from passing loners and travelers. It's sparked my interest. I've been wanting to join for quite a while, but I only just had the confidence to ask," Shell went on.

They were still silent. Shell's gaze flitted over the cats. Suddenly, her gaze landed on her.

Acornpaw flinched a little.

Is she trying to get me to help her?!

Shell's gaze flicked over to Lakestar when the leader spoke.

"Fine. Whatever. I don't care, just do what you want! Seems like I'm hardly running things around here anymore..." Lakestar began to mutter off, walking towards the pines.

The patrol quickly hurried after her, with Shell following along. There were murmurs of fear and surprise running through the large group.

Now they were taking a stranger right into the heart of ShadowClan, and the leader hardly seemed to care.

What's next?

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Chapter Eleven

Warm Newleaf sunshine dappled the needle-strewn forest floor of ShadowClan's pines, illuminating her mottled pelt to a softer tint. The sky was a hazy blue as the sun broke through the streaks of clouds stretched across the depths, offering the weather to soon be a clear, sunny day to compliment her and Beetlepelt's hunting.

She padded carefully through the forest, her wounds stinging painfully. Scratches marred her face, flanks, and belly from the battle. Shrikestripe had offered to keep her in the medicine den so they would heal faster, but Chasingfur had insisted on her continuing with her duties *lightly*, just because the clan was already low on warriors. Some cats were already being confined to Chasingfur's den due to severe injuries. Honeypelt and Chaffinchflare were the most injured and the medicine cats had to keep a close eye on their conditions.

As she padded alongside her mentor, she noticed that there was a tight expression furrowing his face. However, this hardly seemed like a new observation. For the past two days, he seemed to be much quieter and deeper in thought. She had at first wondered if there were more conflicts between him and his brother, but when she saw that they still happily chatted with each other, she realized that this had started when Shell first arrived.

She broke out of her thoughts as Beetlepelt glanced at her.

"Do you have something to ask? You were staring at me," he said.

Acornpaw licked her chest fur, hesitating for a moment, uncertain of how Beetlepelt would react to such a blunt question. With only a few seconds to yield as he stared at her in confusion, waiting for her to speak, she decided to ask anyway.

"Do you think Shell is okay? Do you agree with her joining?" Acornpaw regarded her mentor nervously.

Beetlepelt sighed.

"Seriously? Gossip? We're in the middle of a hunt right now, Acornpaw, unless you'd like to scare off every piece of prey in this area spreading rumors behind a clanmate's back if you will."

Acornpaw fluffed up her pelt with irritation, clamping down her fangs. *Why is he getting so defensive?!*

"But she's not really a clanmate," she found herself arguing, unable to hold back against the sharp nip of annoyance.

Beetlepelt let out another heavy sigh, his ears falling flat against his head.

"I don't think it's a good idea that Shell joined," said Beetlepelt simply, continuing on the trek through the pines. "Lakestar was clearly exhausted when she allowed her into the clan, and I suspect she was hardly paying attention to the events happening around her."

"Do you think Shell is a good cat?" She tilted her head.

Beetlepelt hesitated slightly.

"I haven't spoken to her personally, so I can't say for myself," he said after a moment.

"We need to hunt, I wasn't planning on gossiping the entire time," said Beetlepelt in a sharper tone.

Acornpaw nodded. She knew her mentor well enough to know that when he put on a sharper voice it meant to be serious and get things done.

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With that, the two of them spent the rest of the morning hunting. Most of the time spent hunting took place at the marshes, where she sharpened her technique in hunting the semi-aquatic animals that dwelled in the boggy and puddle-worn grounds. She proudly clutched onto her prizes in her jaws: four frogs and a water vole,

which she had collected on the way back.

"Your training is coming along well," Beetlepelt commented as they toiled up a slight slope, heading in the direction of where the camp resided.

Acornpaw's ears pricked, and she rumbled a soft purr. There was still one moon left of her training, and hearing Beetlepelt's observations on her progress made her even more thrilled as the prospect of being a warrior seemed even more real by the day.

As they rounded a small cedar grove, closing in on where the Training Grounds lay, Acornpaw heard voices. Curious, she paused and looked in the direction of the source of the sound. Goldpelt was leading a patrol, which consisted of Fernfur, Strawpaw, and... *Shell?*

She stiffened. What was the rogue doing out on a *patrol?*

She's a ShadowClan cat now. She's allowed to be on a patrol, she reminded herself.

Beetlepelt had stopped too now, clearly noticing that she was no longer following. As he turned around, Goldpelt and his patrol suddenly approached.

"Greetings, Beetlepelt," Goldpelt said politely, coming to a halt. "Do you mind joining us? We were taking Shell to enlighten her a bit about the territory. You're much wiser beyond your moons, so I was hoping you could assist in teaching her."

"It is almost Sun-high," her mentor remarked.

"This won't take terribly long," Goldpelt promised. "I'll make sure we all return to camp before Sun-high ends."

After a pause, Beetlepelt agreed. Acornpaw studied his gaze. His face did not betray a single thought, yet she still suspected that he didn't exactly want to go on the patrol.

"One moment, we need to bury our prey," he said, giving her a nudge.

Acornpaw had almost forgotten five juicy pieces of prey were dangling from her mouth. Her belly rumbled as she dropped her catches in a small hole next to Beetlepelt's prey before scraping a few leaves over it, and then marking the spot with a stick.

As soon as they finished the task, the two of them headed over to join the patrol.

Acornpaw's pelt prickled uncomfortably as she felt the heat of Shell's gaze graze over her pelt. She knew Shell wanted to talk to her, but her instincts screamed to ignore her. Just because she was the one that had come across her first didn't mean they were friends. With the amount of attention the strange cat cast onto her, she felt even more obliged to not speak with her.

Goldpelt glanced at Beetlepelt.

"So Beetlepelt, where do you think we should take her? She's seen some of the marshes as well as the WindClan border. We've also taught her about the Carrionplace, although she actually hasn't seen it yet."

Beetlepelt's tail tip flicked thoughtfully, and he let out a soft humming noise.

"Well, it sounds like you've shown her most of the important places, except for the ThunderClan border and..." He suddenly trailed off, clamping his jaws shut. It only took her a second to fill in the rest of his sentence: *The tunnel.*

She understood immediately why he hadn't finished the sentence. He didn't completely trust her yet, and the tunnel was a very dangerous secret to spill to newcomers. With Shell just joining the clan, it would be risky to tell her about it.

But when she first asked to join she saw the clan walking out of the tunnel, she suddenly remembered. *So Shell must already know.*

But perhaps she forgot, or didn't think much of it, her thoughts countered.

Acornpaw decided to stick with her thoughts and hope it was true.

"Well then, let's head off there." Goldpelt whisked away in the direction of the Thunderpath.

As she walked through the looming pines, she suddenly realized how many times she had padded across this path toward ThunderClan's border. She felt as if the place she spent the most time, other than the camp, was the border. There constantly seemed to be something happening there: border patrols, skirmishes, gathering patrols, and battles.

The patrol chatted incessantly on the trip there. Shell asked Goldpelt, Beetlepelt, and Fernfur random questions about ShadowClan's traditions, while she and Strawpaw spoke in a quiet tone about Shell.

"She seems really cold to me, honestly," whispered Strawpaw, shooting wary glances at the reddish-brown she-cat.

"Not exactly cold, just distant. Kind of weird too," said Acornpaw. "And I swear she keeps staring at me every time my back is turned."

Strawpaw's expression suddenly grew very dramatic and dark.

"That's not good. She might be plotting something against you..."

Acornpaw oddly felt humorous but played along in a serious tone.

"What do you think she'll do? Plant a thorn in everyone's nests but mine, then make it obvious that it was me?"

Strawpaw shook his head, his eyes grave.

"I know what she's going to do. She's going to start telling horrible jokes to everyone and claim that you were the one who came up with them. One of them would probably be: 'What do you call a pine tree without needles? An oak tree!"

"Shut up! She might hear you!" She hissed as Strawpaw burst into a loud fit of laughter.

Beetlepelt glanced over his shoulder and cast Strawpaw a stern glare.

"Shut it, or I'm going to make you sing a song to this entire patrol," he snapped.

Strawpaw nodded, hanging his head low. He kept making small wheezing sounds, clearly trying to hold back his laughter. Acornpaw gave him a sharp jab on the side, but she couldn't help but keep smirking and making some sort of evil and deformed-looking grin, trying to stop it, as the sound of his laughter kept replaying in her head. He sounded like a dying goose.

They finally reached the Thunderpath without any more terrible jokes and incidental laughter attacks.

Shell drew close to the scent line between ShadowClan and ThunderClan, her jaws parted to taste the air and her eyes flashing with curiosity.

"So over there where the oak trees are is where LightningClan lives you say? Is that what they're called?"

"ThunderClan," Goldpelt corrected her.

"Right. I knew that sounded wrong."

"Just think of it like this: the Thunderpath is loud and annoying, and ThunderClan has 'Thunder' in it, and they're also loud and annoying. That might help you remember," said Fernfur with a dry chuckle.

Shell's whiskers twitched.

"So this is the one you're at war with?" She asked, tipping her head to the side slightly.

"Yes, although I would personally say the war is over. But our last battle wasn't very long ago, which means ThunderClan could still retaliate. So it's safer to say we're still at war," Goldpelt told her.

Acornpaw noticed Goldpelt shoot a glance at Beetlepelt. Was the deputy wondering if he would say anything? Beetlepelt hadn't given very many 'words of wisdom', being oddly quiet. She wondered if he felt uncomfortable around Shell, or just didn't have much to say.

Her thoughts were interrupted as the undergrowth on the opposite side of the Thunderpath suddenly shivered. ThunderClan scent wreathed over them as a patrol pushed out from the brambles. They looked battle-hungry as they approached the Thunderpath with unsheathed claws and pinned ears.

Acornpaw's eyes rounded as she recognized a familiar light brown tabby with large doe-brown eyes in the patrol.

Sparrowpaw!

A golden-and-white tabby tom was in the lead, his amber eyes glaring as he stared threateningly at the ShadowClan cats.

"So low in ranks that you have to start recruiting rogues?" He sneered, spit flying from his jaws.

"Keep your mouth shut, you're going to infect us with your diseases," Fernfur muttered.

"What was that? Speak up!" He yowled with a lashing tail.

"Why should we have to repeat ourselves for you, mangy furballs?!"

Acornpaw looked up in surprise as Shell quickly sprang to their defense, her fangs bared.

Another cat, a tortoiseshell she-cat, let out a loud coughing noise.

"Great StarClan she stinks! Of course ShadowClan would let in a cat that reeks of Crowfood into their clan!"

"Right, because they eat Crowfood," a tom said snarkily.

"You are what you eat," another snickered.

"So with that logic does that mean all of you are a bunch of fuzz-brained squirrels?" Shell snarled. Acornpaw was impressed at her comebacks with the fact that the she-cat hardly knew who ThunderClan was.

"Better than eating *frogs!*" Sparrowpaw yowled.

Acornpaw's ears flattened. Did Sparrowpaw not recognize her, or did she simply not care?

We're enemies now, not friends. When Gatherings are over everyone is back to being rivals, she reminded herself sternly.

Beetlepelt let out a loud huff, breaking her out of her thoughts.

"I see that all of you are still embarrassed about us *devastating* your camp. I would be too if I moved at slug-speed to try to defend my clanmates and miserably failed because I was falling asleep on my paws," he hissed icily.

"At least we're not mouse-hearts that attack innocent cats while they're asleep in their nests," snarled the leading tom.

"Yeah right, *innocent*. Keep telling yourselves that while you go about your days peacefully, completely forgetting the fact that you *murdered* Sleetpath. Come on, we're wasting our time here." Goldpelt's eyes were slitted as he turned, flicking his tail as a signal for the patrol to follow him. The ThunderClan patrol continued to throw jeers at them while they stalked away.

"I'll make sure to report this to Lakestar," Goldpelt muttered.

Although moods were now soured by the encounter with ThunderClan, Acornpaw glanced at Shell, feeling a spark of curiosity run through her veins. But it wasn't just curiosity, it was a mingled sense of guilt. She had completely doubted Shell just for previously being an outsider. But it was more than just clear that she was loyal to ShadowClan. She was willing and eager to learn about the clan's traditions and quick to defend against ThunderClan.

She was curious about Shell. She was an interesting cat, and she wanted to learn more about her. So, what harm would it do to pry a little further into this cat's motives?

Chapter Twelve

As Goldpelt, Beetlepelt, and Fernfur went to report to Lakestar, Acornpaw grabbed a plump mouse from the fresh-kill pile just after depositing her own prey then padded over to Shell.

Strawpaw halted her in the middle of her tracks, looking from her to Shell.

"Are you bringing her that prey? I thought you said she was weird," he whispered.

Acornpaw flicked her tail dismissively.

"I said that without even talking to her before. I just wanted to see if what I said was true," she mumbled between the prey in her jaws.

He stepped aside but still looked puzzled as she padded toward the reddish-brown she-cat.

Shell was resting in the rays cast by the sun in the middle of the clearing. However, she didn't look completely comfortable. With the fleeting glances she shot around the camp, Acornpaw assumed that she was still not used to living in the clan.

"Hi Shell," she mewed awkwardly, dropping the mouse at her paws. Shell looked up in surprise.

Then, Shell rumbled a soft purr.

"Hi Acornpaw, I thought you would never come to talk to me." She blinked eagerly at her, then sniffed the mouse that was now lying in front of her. "Is this for me?"

She nodded before Shell began gnawing hungrily away at the prey. She waited impatiently for her to finish, her tail flicking absently.

"That was good, thanks," said the she-cat, pushing away the remains of the mouse and licking her jaws clean.

"I was afraid I had scared you when we first met," Shell began after a few heartbeats. There was a bit of humor twinkling in her gaze. "I swore I heard a branch snap when you shrieked because of how loud it was."

Acornpaw snorted.

"You didn't just scare me, you *spooked* the fur right off my pelt." Acornpaw emphasized this with rounded eyes.

"...Sorry." Shell licked her chest fur.

"I suppose it's alright. Thankfully I have recovered from the heart attack," she said mischievously.

"Great, am I really that scary-looking to where I literally gave you a heart attack?" Shell asked playfully with a *mrrow* of laughter.

"Don't worry, just kidding." She grinned. "Or am I?"

She never would've thought how easy it would be to talk to Shell.

"Oh you are kidding, I'm a very flattering cat. When I traveled with my littermates I had toms padding after me all of the time!" Shell laughed. "But that was back when I lived in the twolegplace. No other loners I know of live in the pine forest."

Acornpaw's ears pricked with interest.

"You said you lived in the twolegplace? With your littermates? Were you a kittypet?"

Shell wrinkled her muzzle.

"I'm certainly not a kittypet! I hunted my own food unlike those *petite* little creatures locked in their cages all day." Shell shook her head in disgust. "Now what were those other questions?"

"You lived in the twolegplace with your littermates?" She repeated.

Shell stretched languidly, letting out a large yawn before settling down in a more comfortable position.

"I might as well start you from the beginning since my life is quite eventful," She said with a chuckle after a long moment. "Now, although I say that I was in the twolegplace with my littermates, I wasn't born there. The first place I can remember being when I first opened my eyes was a place somewhat close to the clans' forests. I spent most of my time in this little log den while my mother went off on long hunting trips. Keep in mind this was Leaf-bare so prey was very scarce and I was constantly hungry."

Acornpaw widened her eyes.

"She took care of you alone?"

Shell nodded.

"Unlike the clans, outsiders have a very different way of life. Fathers don't stick around to care for their kits. In fact, most toms that have taken a mate before are completely unaware that they may have any offspring. And, the kits live to never know their father. Not like it matters anyway."

Acornpaw shuddered a little. She couldn't imagine never knowing who her father was.

"Back to my story. We lived for quite some time in the area until one very cold day a sibling of mine didn't make it. He was smaller and weaker than the rest of us, and with the lack of food, he obviously couldn't pull through. Because of his death, my mother decided to take me and my four littermates somewhere farther away from the forest and a little closer to the twolegplace. She was able to scavenge and find much more food than before. Thankfully, the five of us lived through Leaf-bare.

"When we were around five moons old, my mother let us run about and hunt for ourselves. I mastered hunting mice and the art of stealing twoleg prey." Shell let out a laugh, seemingly remembering fond memories of her mischief. "Just two moons later we said goodbye to our mom and traveled off on our own."

"You went off on your own when you were just *seven* moons old?!" Acornpaw exclaimed. "How could you have possibly survived?"

Shell's whiskers twitched.

"Like I said, I learned a few hunting techniques. Plus, I was with my littermates, so I wasn't just alone of course."

"Right, right." Acornpaw still found it hard to believe that Shell went traveling off when she was barely apprentice age.

"Anyway, my siblings and I decided to travel *completely* into the twolegplace. This was my sister's idea, although I don't exactly remember her reasoning for this. My guess though is that she thought we would have way more food if we lived in the twolegplace rather than the forest." Shell shook her head sadly. "Ah, I miss her. She was the best sister anyone could ask for."

Acornpaw's eyes grew round.

"Did she...*die?*"

Shell quickly shook her head.

"Of course not! We just all split up at the end... and yeah, I haven't gotten there yet. Allow me to continue.

"So, we lived there for quite a while, for about, let's see..." She trailed off, counting her claws. "Five moons! During that time our skills sharpened and I found myself wandering farther and farther away from the busy sections of the twolegplace. All of us were pretty independent by then so sometimes a sibling would disappear for a few days then return."

Acornpaw shuddered.

"I couldn't even imagine! Me and my siblings are super close!"

Shell chuckled.

"Like I said, things are really different outside the clans."

She continued with her story.

"One day, we all met up and decided it was time for us to split off.

We were hardly seeing each other anymore, and at that point, we were very independent. I didn't need to rely on my siblings anymore in case we were attacked by anything; I had mastered self-defense. So then, we all went our separate ways. Which then led me back to the forests, close to where I was born. I then strayed farther and farther until I reached the pines! Finally, to wrap up the story, I was fifteen moons old and decided I was very unhappy living as a loner so I ended up joining ShadowClan! The end!"

Acornpaw blinked rapidly, still processing. She had made such a tragic life sound so interesting and light-hearted! But Shell *had* already said that this way of life was completely normal to loners.

Shell tipped her head to one side.

"So? What do you think?" She insisted.

"What do *I* think? Well, I don't know, I just couldn't possibly imagine living like that. Do you not... miss your siblings or anything? What about your mom?" With Acornpaw living in the caring and loving family she had, it was very difficult for the she-cat to grasp the concept of a cat willing to split off from their family without too much thought. But, of course, what did the young cat know? Living in the mostly sheltered life she did, except for the battles she had fought in, she often forgot that other felines actually went through many real conflicts with their lives.

Shell thought for a moment.

"I do sometimes miss my littermates, especially my sister," Shell admitted. "But I don't think about them every day. Honestly, I think it's better that I took the path that I did. This feels like home."

Acornpaw purred.

"You made the right decision choosing ShadowClan. The other clans stink." She grinned.

"Right. Especially ThunderClan." Shell wrinkled her nose. "Also, I was a bit embarrassed to ask... what are the names of the other clans again?"

"RiverClan and WindClan," Acornpaw told her. "WindClan is the other clan we border. They're fast and cunning but rabbit-brained too. RiverClan is the only clan that we don't share any borders with. Their name is pretty easy to remember though because they live by the river and eat fish. They practically *are* fish."

"They *swim?!*" Shell sounded horrified. "What is wrong with them?"

"A lot of things apparently," she said with a snort.

"Hey, Acornpaw!"

Beetlepelt's voice made her spin around in surprise.

"Yes, Beetlepelt?" She blinked at her mentor, feeling a small twinge of disappointment in her stomach. She knew immediately where this was heading.

"Go clean out the old nests in the nursery, I'm sure Drystreak and the queens would appreciate it. Sun-high is over," he told her. His yellow gaze was sharper than usual.

She felt an odd sense of unease at his expression.

"Alright."

She mewed a soft goodbye to Shell before padding to the nursery, her mind roiling with thoughts.

Chapter Thirteen

The last thing she had expected to lighten her busy day was five tiny fuzzballs to peek their heads out of the nursery, peering at the camp in wonder with round eyes.

She had been padding beside Cherrypaw, each of them carrying a bundle of moss to the medicine den when suddenly Cherrypaw gave a little leap in the air and dropped her bundle.

"Look! The kits are outside!" She exclaimed.

At first, she thought she meant *outside* outside, but when she whipped her head around to see, she realized that she just meant the camp.

Completely forgetting their task, the two of them raced over to meet the kits.

They mewled in terror as the two of them skidded to a halt outside the nursery. Drystreak was sitting at the entrance, who the kittens quickly ran to hide behind. With an exasperated shake of the head, she urged them out from hiding with a rough nudge forward.

"They're your siblings, there's nothing to be scared about," Drystreak huffed.

A little brown-gold tabby tom scampered out from behind his mother and immediately went up to the sisters, stretching up to his full height so he could take a close look at the two of them. She immediately recognized him to be Luckkit, as he was the only tom in the litter.

"Hi," he squeaked. "Names?"

"I'm Cherrypaw! And she's Acornpaw!" Cherrypaw exclaimed.

"We're your sisters," Acornpaw added with a smile.

Luckkit's eyes grew huge with excitement.

"They're *'paws!*" He began to race around in circles with joy, while the other kits bounded out from their hiding with curiosity.

As the rest of the kits joined in with Luckkit and began chasing after him, she took the moment to remember each of their names. She knew that the smoky-gray she-kit was Firkit and the gold tabby batting at her tail was Amberkit. That left the gray spotted she-kit to be Flurrykit, and finally the last gold she-kit to be Prancekit.

With a small *mrrow* of laughter, she was relieved to see that Prancekit's name actually *did* fit her as she pranced around with her littermates.

"Lakestar! Can I go see the kits? Please?"

She glanced over, spotting Strawpaw. He was begging Lakestar, his temporary mentor.

Lakestar muttered something that she wasn't able to make out, but whatever it was, it was clearly a 'yes' as Strawpaw came bounding over to them.

The kits gave the same response as they did to her and Cherrypaw, racing to hide behind their mother's fur.

Drystreak let out a huge sigh, clearly irritated as she had been just in the middle of cleaning her pelt.

"Will you five little mice quit hiding behind me?" She snapped, side-stepping. "He's your older brother, Strawpaw. Nothing to be afraid of!"

They crept out again. Luckkit and Amberkit, the two most confident out of the litter, padded up to Strawpaw and peered up at him with round blue eyes, which were already fading to their adult eye colors.

"What's your name?" Amberkit demanded, despite Drystreak already saying it a moment ago.

Strawpaw looked a little nervous at the kit's demeanor.

"Strawpaw," he replied.

"They're all 'paws!" Amberkit gasped.

"Not fair!" Luckkit muttered.

"You only have to wait, what, five moons?" said Acornpaw. "Look, it's not terribly long."

"That's *forever*!" Luckkit sighed. "I'm almost as big as Strawpaw! Please can I be a 'paw now?"

Acornpaw snorted to herself. Luckkit was barely half as big as Strawpaw, and he was attempting to stand at the tallest he could to at least *try* to seem a comparable height. He was failing miserably.

"A real warrior can wait five moons," said Cherrypaw matter-of-factly. "I'm sure you can do it."

Luckkit cast his pleading gaze onto his mother, but she was cleaning her pelt and hardly paying any attention. Luckkit let out a big huff and stomped his paw on the ground.

Nearby, she noticed that Flurrykit was batting at a ball of moss, while Firkit watched from the side. An idea sparked in her mind, one that could prevent Luckkit from throwing a major hissy fit.

"Look! Why don't we all play Mossball?"

Luckkit, with a newfound excitement, bounced on his paws.

"Yeah!" He squeaked.

Flurrykit, clearly eager to play Mossball with the rest of them, held up her paw and then batted it in their direction.

Prancekit was the closest and lunged for it with outstretched paws. Then, she hooked it up with her claw, slowly glancing around to decide who to throw it at.

Acornpaw tensed, preparing. Although she hadn't played Mossball since she was a kit, her old memories still swam back to her. Her favorite game wouldn't be forgotten so easily.

Strawpaw was Prancekit's victim. She flung it at the tom, and just before he could catch it, Luckkit lunged upwards and yanked it out of the air.

It slipped out of his claws and began rolling towards Firkit.

"Firkit get it! Throw it to me we're a team!" Amberkit squealed.

She snorted to herself. She didn't know they were choosing teams.

"Cherrypaw, you're on my team then," she said, giving her a nudge.

"Hey," Strawpaw huffed, left out.

"Nah, I was already planning on asking Luckkit. Hey, Luckkit, wanna be on my team?" Cherrypaw asked with a grin.

Luckkit bounced up and down enthusiastically.

"Yeah!" He squealed.

"Flurrykit, wanna be on my team?" Strawpaw glanced at the fluffy gray she-kit.

"Okay!"

Acornpaw glanced around for Prancekit, deciding to ask her to be on her team. But that was when the mossball was practically flung in her face.

She was able to catch it just before it hit her. With a grin she decided to use her old trick: aim it towards someone but then throw it at someone else. In this case, she aimed the mossball in Amberkit's direction before flinging it at Cherrypaw.

The kits were sent into a frenzy at Acornpaw's trick. Cherrypaw ducked just in time before Luckkit leaped over her to catch it right into his paws.

Luckkit dropped the moss ball and held it between his claws.

"I think the teams should make more sense. There should be a ShadowClan team, ThunderClan, WindClan, and RiverClan," he said matter-of-factly, holding onto the mossball protectively so no kit would steal it out of his paws. "If a cat hits another cat in the same team, they're not out because they're on the same team obviously."

"And more than one 'paw can't be on the same team because that's not fair!" Amberkit added sharply. Acornpaw noticed how she had the same familiar sharp tone of voice that Drystreak often used.

"There can be two cats per team," said Strawpaw. "Because there's eight of us."

The large group sidled a bit more into the clearing so there was more space, and so they wouldn't bother Drystreak, who was continuing to clean her pelt.

"How about I pick who goes on what team so it's fair," said Firkit calmly, stepping forward. Everyone else agreed to this.

"Flurrykit and I will be on ShadowClan," she began.

"You better not put me in stinky ThunderClan," Amberkit muttered.

"Cherrypaw and Luckkit can be ThunderClan," Firkit went on.

Amberkit grinned at the fact that she wasn't put on ThunderClan's team. Luckkit, on the other hand, looked cross and stuck out his tongue in a 'blegh'.

"Acornpaw and Prancekit will be on WindClan, and finally, Strawpaw and Amberkit will be on RiverClan."

"Yuck! But RiverClan are stinky fish!" Amberkit hissed. "Can I be on WindClan instead? Please?"

"Nope, you get to be stinky RiverClan!" Luckkit teased, grinning ear-to-ear.

"I don't want to hear it, ThunderClan mouse!" Amberkit lunged at

her brother, boxing his ears.

"You two, stop fighting, or we're never going to get to play Mossball," said Firkit, attempting to break up the tussling kits.

Firkit always seems so calm, and quick to make peace, Acornpaw thought as Amberkit and Luckkit broke apart. *Maybe one day she'll become a mediator*.

Firkit carefully batted the mossball to the center, steadying it so it wouldn't roll away, before getting in her place next to Flurrykit.

Prancekit glanced up at Acornpaw from next to her, eyes twinkling mischievously.

"I'll try to get the mossball first, okay?" She whispered, her muscles taut. "I'm pretty fast."

Acornpaw nodded seriously.

"Okay, to the count of three..." Firkit's raised her tail.

Everyone tensed, leaning forward.

"Two...one...three...now!" Firkit dropped her tail.

Acornpaw decided to stand and wait as Prancekit darted forward, her pelt a flash of gold as she lunged for the mossball. But Luckkit had reached it at the same time and they collided into a tussling ball of fur, squeaking and growling playfully.

In the middle of their fighting, the mossball got flung upwards and Acornpaw quickly lunged forward and snagged it out of the air with her claws. Prancekit and Luckkit broke apart, and Luckkit tried to leap in the air to steal it from her grasp.

Seeing that Cherrypaw was distracted she flung it at the she-cat. It landed smack on her shoulder. She was out.

"Mouse-dung," Cherrypaw grumbled, backing away.

"Hey, don't use that word in front of my kits."

The voice belonged to Fernfur. He had just returned from a hunting patrol and was dropping several pieces of prey in the fresh-kill, which they were practically standing on at this point as they had backed up pretty far into the clearing.

"Sorry," Cherrypaw muttered, avoiding his gaze.

Acornpaw's ear flicked in surprise at the tone of voice Fernfur used around Cherrypaw. It seemed so sharp and cold, compared to how he talked to her and Strawpaw.

He's probably just thinking about the kits, that's all, her mind retaliated.

"Hi, dad!" Luckkit pounced toward Fernfur, looking up at his father with a shining gaze. "We were playing mossball! But now that you're here, can we learn some battle moves instead? Please?"

Fernfur's eyes were gentle.

"No, you're too young," he chided the kit.

Luckkit lashed his tail.

"Pretty please?" Amberkit begged, racing forward. "We can handle it! I was able to beat Luckkit in a fight earlier too!"

"Did not!" Luckkit snapped.

"Did too!"

"Hey, you three."

Her heart gave a little leap in her chest as she recognized Beetlepelt's voice. Lakestar and Goldpelt were at each of his sides, and she quickly stood up taller under the leader and deputy's presence.

"After some discussion, we believe all three of you are ready to take your warrior's assessments," said Lakestar. "I'll be taking charge of Strawpaw's since Chaffinchflare is in the medicine den."

Acornpaw didn't think it was possible to get any happier, but clearly, it was. She and her littermates swapped overjoyed looks, while Cherrypaw gave a little bounce in the air.

"Now you're gonna be warriors?" Luckkit looked shocked, staring up at the littermates with his mouth gaping open. "No fair!"

"Once they pass their assessments," said Goldpelt, blinking at the kit gently.

Luckkit looked nervous with the deputy's presence and hurried to hide behind Fernfur.

"Come on, let's get going now," Lakestar snapped, flicking her tail.

The three littermates quickly grouped up together before following their mentors to the entrance, whispering with excitement.

I can't believe it! Now all I have to do is pass!

author's note-

moving forward there will now be updates weekly! The plot has been starting out pretty slow but it's finally heading in the direction I want it to! :)

that being said, with the direction of the plot I can already see the story will turn out way longer than expected. Originally I planned for around 25 chapters, but now it looks like it's going to turn out to be well over 40 D:

Chapter Fourteen

"You must hunt a decent amount of prey," said Beetlepelt as they padded through the pines, blurring together in the corners of her eyes.

"It's not exactly about how much prey you get," Goldpelt added quickly. "It's about the strategies you use along the way. We'll leave you three off to your own, but remember: you cannot help each other. Also, there will *always* be an eye on each of you, so don't think we can't see you if you're breaking any rules."

"We'll tell you when to stop. Is that clear?" Lakestar asked gruffly.

"Yep. We're on it!" Cherrypaw exclaimed, hardly able to keep still from excitement.

"Alright. You may begin."

The two mentors and the leader slipped off into the pines, soon vanishing from their view as they blended into the forest.

"How about we all take different directions?" Acornpaw offered as they went silent. "I'm going to head towards the marshes."

"Good idea, I'm going to go that way." Strawpaw flicked his tail towards the left of him.

"I'll figure out somewhere," said Cherrypaw, suddenly looking a little overwhelmed.

With that, they split off.

Acornpaw kept her senses alert as she prowled through the territory, just in case she encountered any prey on the way to the marshes. Hunting in the marshes would guarantee passing; prey thrived in that area with Newleaf warming the air.

Although she didn't find any prey on the trek there, her excitement

returned as the sound of croaking filled the air, and the buzz of marsh bugs hummed around her. Swaths of flowers poked here and there through the undergrowth, alive with insects crawling and buzzing over them, hungry for pollen. If there were insects, she knew there was prey.

It hardly took a moment to find her first piece of prey. A frog had practically hopped *straight* into her claws, and she killed it swiftly.

As she padded forward, her body becoming weighed down with mud as puddles splashed at her flanks and haunches, soon came across a wonderful sight. Several blackbirds were hopping about, fledglings by the look of it.

Perfect. Although she felt a little guilty for the fact that they had just left their nest, she needed to pass her test.

As quietly as possible, eyes focused on the little birds, she stalked forward. Her tail was as still as possible, and her breathing was light and controlled.

One...

Two...

Three...

Now!

She lunged forward, pouncing on the one closest to her. Squawks filled the air as they panicked, but she was able to catch two of them, while the others escaped by darting into some of the nearby bushes, clearly still unable to fly.

She looked over her catches.

A frog and two blackbirds. Not terrible, I suppose, but I'm sure Beetlepelt is expecting me to catch more. It's Newleaf after all.

She buried her prey before prowling onwards. She suspected there would be more frogs closer to the stream.

Sure enough, hopping about on the rocks and grasses bordering the stream, were frogs. She pounced for the first one it saw, but thanks to its slimy skin it wriggled free and darted into the grasses. Cursing under her breath she continued to forage more into the grasses before more frogs hopped about. Thankfully, her claw snagged onto one, and she held it up to her face so she could give it the killing bite.

Acornpaw found that she was unsuccessful as she continued to search for more. They easily slipped away from her claws, and with ease could blend in with the undergrowth. Eventually, she gave up and padded back to where her other catches were with her singular frog hanging from her jaws.

Just as she started to dig up her catches and move on elsewhere, Beetlepelt slipped out of the undergrowth, his black and white pelt smeared with mud.

"I believe that's enough for now," he said, gazing down at her findings. "It's a decent amount I suppose. Instead of rummaging through the grasses, you could have waited for a few frogs to hop out instead and pounce on them."

She nodded.

"I guess so, but they're so slippery! It's impossible to catch them!"

"True, although that doesn't exactly feed any mouths. However, your stalking form was excellent, and even more so your work in catching the blackbirds. I believe you passed."

She lifted her chin with pride, purring eagerly. *That was easier than I expected!*

They headed back in the direction of camp, before turning and entering the Training Grounds to meet up with the rest of the mentors. Lakestar and Strawpaw were already there, but Goldpelt and Cherrypaw were yet to arrive.

"Did you pass?" Strawpaw asked eagerly, bounding over to her.

She nodded, eyes gleaming.

"What about you?"

"I passed by a *whisker*," he said, puffing out his chest. "I caught two voles, but Lakestar decided to let me pass anyway."

"*Two* voles?!" She practically choked on her spit. *And I thought my four catches were bad!*

A moment later, Goldpelt and Cherrypaw showed up. She had a plump crow hanging from her jaws and two mice which Goldpelt carried for her.

"I passed!" Cherrypaw exclaimed, dropping the huge crow at her paws. Both she and Strawpaw looked down at her crow with envy, and she assumed that the crow was the entire reason she had passed in the first place.

"Now we can all be warriors!" Her eyes were shining, although she still felt as if she was processing the entire thing; the last thing she had expected today was to pass her warrior's assessment.

"I'll hold your warrior ceremony a bit after we arrive at camp," Lakestar told them. Even the gruff she-cat looked somewhat happy, with gleaming cobalt eyes.

As they began to pad back to camp, Acornpaw fell into step with Beetlepelt.

"Are you sure there wasn't supposed to be more to the assessment?" She asked, her tail twitching with uncertainty. It wasn't like she *wanted* there to be more, but it felt as if she could've worked more to pass the test.

"We already knew you three were ready to be warriors," he told her. "The assessment was just one last checkpoint to make sure of it."

"Oh, okay," she mewed.

"I promise you, you were a lot more ready than you thought," Beetlepelt went on. "It's been clear enough that you've learned everything you need. I would even say you could've been made a warrior a moon ago."

Her ears pricked. "Really?"

"Yep, but with the whole war going on with ThunderClan the clan was too busy to consider three new warriors. But, either way, just feel proud of yourself, okay? Today's a big day."

She nodded, his words echoing in her mind as she padded through the camp entrance.

Acornpaw was pretty sure she might explode from happiness, and judging by her littermates' expressions, she suspected they felt the same.

Lakestar had bounded up to the Shade Rock and was perched on it, yet to call the meeting. With the moments to spare before she began the ceremony, Drystreak and Fernfur rushed over to them.

"I can't believe it! I still remember when you were teensy little kits opening your eyes for the first time," Drystreak gasped, her voice heavy with emotions. She sprang for Cherrypaw first and rasped her tongue over her pelt.

"Mom, you're embarrassing me," Cherrypaw complained, fighting away from her.

"Let her clean you, Cherrypaw," Fernfur snapped before padding over to her and Strawpaw.

"You two should be proud of yourselves, you worked hard for this," he said, his eyes shining.

"We are, and we'll make you proud," Acornpaw promised.

"You already have." He flicked his tail across her ears good-naturedly before padding over to Drystreak.

Cherrypaw finally broke free from Drystreak and bounded over to her and Strawpaw, looking horribly embarrassed. But then, her eyes darkened as if a new thought had entered her mind.

"I hope Lakestar has picked out a good name for me," Cherrypaw said. "It better not be something weird!"

"Like Cherrysludge?" Strawpaw offered teasingly.

"Or Cherryrump," she said with a snort.

Cherrypaw flattened her ears.

"I guess today I'll find out whether Lakestar hates me or not."

"Yeah, I better get a good name too," Strawpaw went on. "Strawstorm would be so awesome! Or Strawflame! Strawclaw would also be okay, but it's pretty basic."

"I hope she doesn't give me a basic name, like Acornfur," she mewed, suddenly anxious.

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey join me beneath the Shade Rock for a clan meeting!" Lakestar's voice cut across the clearing.

Their ears pricked, exchanging excited glances. As she bounded over to the center of the clearing beneath the meeting rock, she mused how Lakestar actually needed to use the ceremonial meeting call, now that there were finally kits in ShadowClan. However, Drystreak still allowed them to sit in front of the nursery to watch their old siblings' warrior ceremony, although she could hear her mother say sternly: "Don't you dare say a single word or I'll send you straight back to your nest!"

She settled in between Cherrypaw and Strawpaw. Beetlepelt and Runningheart padded from the fresh-kill pile, abandoning their meal. Beetlepelt shot her a grin, and she exchanged one back. The rest of the clan began to join the already-gathered cats. Shell and Brookdaisy sat nearby them, while Pigeonsilk sat closer to the Shade Rock, glancing up at Lakestar. Brownsnout was having a serious discussion with Hazyfall as they padded from their den, and Goldennewt appeared from some other part of the camp. Chasingfur and Shrikestripe joined the gathered cats, although Shrikestripe was casting a watchful eye toward the medicine den, where Chaffinchflare gazed out from the entrance to see his apprentice, his eyes shining.

Once everyone seemed to be settled, Lakestar began. Acornpaw gave Cherrypaw a little nudge as she wouldn't stop fidgeting next to her before re-focusing on the leader.

"I have called this meeting to announce to the clan that three apprentices have completed their training and passed their assessments. Today they are ready to be given their full warrior names," Lakestar announced.

The leader cast her cobalt gaze down on the three of them.

"Strawpaw, Acornpaw, and Cherrypaw, step forward."

She did so with Strawpaw and Cherrypaw, her pelt prickling as a nervous energy crackled around her. She could feel the eyes of her clanmates watching her. She straightened her posture a little, remembering the kits were watching too. She wanted to set a good example for her little siblings.

"I, Lakestar, leader of ShadowClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these apprentices." She paused dramatically, and Acornpaw tensed. "They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as a warrior in turn."

"Cherrypaw, Strawpaw, and Acornpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend your clan, even at the cost of your lives?"

"I do," they said together. Cherrypaw's was practically a squeal of excitement, and she quickly licked her chest fur in embarrassment.

"Then by the power of StarClan, I give you your warrior names. Cherrypaw-"

Cherrypaw's ears pricked up.

"-you will now be known as Cherryspark. StarClan honors your energy and spirit."

Cherryspark! Cherryspark! The clan chanted.

"Strawpaw."

His eyes seemed to gleam a little brighter.

"From this moment on, you will be known as Strawfur. StarClan honors your compassion and loyalty."

Strawfur! Strawfur!

"Acornpaw."

Her heart quickened, and she lifted her chin.

"You will now be known as Acorndapple. StarClan honors your strategy and loyalty and we welcome you as a full warrior of ShadowClan."

The clan erupted into cheers. This time, it was for all three fully-named warriors.

"Cherryspark! Strawfur! Acorndapple!"

She noticed Shell chanting her name the loudest. She met her gaze and the red-brown she-cat gave her a warm smile, which she gave back.

The deputy padded over to the three of them, dipping his head.

"Tonight you three will have your vigil. For now... feast, and enjoy the rest of the evening."

As he padded off, Cherrypaw-no, Cherry*spark* bounced on her paws enthusiastically.

"Good thing she was nice enough to give you the name Cherry*spark* and not Cherry*sludge*," said Strawfur teasingly.

"I could tell she was about to give you that name, but changed her mind last second," Acorndapple added with a grin.

Cherryspark snorted.

"Yeah, sure, say that all you want. But truthfully, you guys are all

jealous. I mean Straw*fur?* Psh, that's the most basic name ever!"

As Strawfur leaped at her and tackled her to the ground, Cherryspark still didn't hesitate to yowl at Acorndapple: "And what the heck is the name Acorn*dapple?* I mean, what did she even name *you* after- ow!"

Acorndapple had joined in and was now boxing her ears, while Strawfur kept her pinned to the ground.

"Get off me, you great lump of fur!" Cherryspark hissed, grunting as she kicked away Strawfur.

"Hey! Are you trying to call me fat?!"

"*Trying?!* No, I *am* calling you fat!-"

"Congratulations!" Said Beetlepelt, causing them to halt in the middle of their play-fighting.

Cherryspark took the chance to slide away from Acorndapple's grasp before ambling over to Beetlepelt.

"Thanks, Beetle, you were always there for me when these stupid furballs weren't." She glanced over her shoulder and stuck her tongue childishly at them.

She then turned back to him and tilted her head.

"Oh, and I just wanted to ask, Beetlepelt, but has anyone told you how beautiful your eyes are?" Cherryspark said bashfully, batting her eyes at him.

"Seriously, Cherrsypark?!" Strawfur said with a 'blegh', while Acorndapple just sighed and shook her head wearily, horribly embarrassed.

Beetlepelt flicked his ear. He didn't even look *close* to flattered, much to Acorndapple's amusement.

"You must be the millionth cat that has told me that before, but thanks though," he replied sarcastically.

Cherryspark rolled her eyes.

"Silly you, there's hardly anyone your age in the clan." She then narrowed her eyes suspiciously.

Beetlepelt cleaned his whiskers nonchalantly. "Gatherings, of course. I still remember that one with the stripes- I could get her back in a heartbeat if I wanted to. Or her friend with the spots, I wouldn't even have to try."

Acorndapple leaned over to Strawfur's ear and whispered: "Next Gathering, I'm keeping an eye on him!"

"Count me in!" Strawfur said quietly back to her.

Cherryspark flattened her ears.

"Do my ears deceive me, or do I hear a competition?" Cherryspark's frown turned into a smirk. "Say, next Gathering, why don't we see who can flirt with the most cats before the leaders start announcements?"

"Alright, we'll see how that works out tomorrow." Beetlepelt rose to his paws before padding away to Runningheart.

"The Gathering is tomorrow?" Acorndapple said with a frown.

"Yeah, tomorrow is a full moon," Strawfur replied before padding over to Cherryspark. She quickly followed after him.

"Do you seriously have to flirt with everyone?" Acorndapple asked with a sigh, rolling her eyes at her sister.

Cherryspark blinked innocently.

"I have to hold on to the record-breaking title of being the most charming cat in ShadowClan, of course!"

"Yeah, okay, but my *mentor* out of all cats," Acorndapple snapped.

She tilted her head, looking a little bit serious now.

"You can tell me if you're jealous."

Strawfur gasped, and Acorndapple felt a little more nauseous.

"Cherryspark, seriously?! He was my mentor!"

She flicked her ear dismissively.

"So? He's like five moons older than you, Acorn. He's not like some creepy senior warrior that's forty moons older than you."

Acorndapple just shook her head in confusion.

"But that doesn't mean I like him!"

"Alright, alright, whatever you say."

She padded away quickly. Cherryspark's actions always found a way to make her feel embarrassed about something or other. On the day of her *warrior* ceremony too?

She let out a deep sigh, before searching the clearing for either the rest of her family or a friend. Her gaze fell across Shell, who was chatting eagerly with Brookdaisy.

She had never been too fond of the fierce tom, especially because Cherryspark was always padding after him, but for this instance, Shell looked inviting so she trotted over anyway, curious of their conversation as well.

"So then I saw this huge dog which looked like it was literally about to kill me- hello, Acorn*dapple*!" Shell grinned as she approached, breaking off her conversation. "Congrats' on finally being a warrior!"

Brookdaisy's expression suddenly looked annoyed by her presence. Acorndapple did her best to ignore him as she turned to Shell and purred happily.

"Thanks, it felt as if I've been an apprentice for *years*," she sighed. "Anyway, what were you talking about?"

"Oh, y'know, just some stories about my adventures living in the twolegplace...nothing too interesting of course." Shell grinned.

"*I* thought they were interesting," Brookdaisy huffed, looking irritated.

Brookdaisy's gaze met her's. She was a little taken aback.

"I'm sure you have lots of... *warrior* stuff and celebrations to do, so why don't you go do that, Acorndapple?" Brookdaisy's voice had a note of sneer to it.

Her ears flattened.

Rude. What did I ever do to you, fox-heart? She wanted to snap, but painfully held it in as she was always told to hold her tongue.

Instead, she forced an, "alright" before stalking away.

"Bye, Acorndapple!" She heard Shell call, which she returned half-heartedly, mood dampened by Brookdaisy's hostility.

She hadn't even realized that it was already evening until Goldpelt padded up to her.

"It's time for your vigil. Strawfur and Cherryspark are already at the entrance, so you best go join them," said the deputy calmly. "Don't forget: the vigil is completely silent."

She dipped her head respectfully before hurrying to the entrance to join her siblings.

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artfight attack by mop-456

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Chapter Fifteen

The full moon hung in the sky, bathing the camp in a gentle silver glow. Tonight was the night of the Gathering; only the night before did she have her vigil, so the mottled she-cat was still fighting exhaustion. She wondered if Lakestar would allow her and her littermates to go. After all, it would be their first Gathering as warriors.

She suspected Lakestar would assign them on the Gathering patrol anyway. The white spotted she-cat had seemed very eager lately to assign border patrols at the ThunderClan border, heightening the hostility between the two rival clans. Bringing three brand-new warriors to the Gathering could make ShadowClan seem much more stronger than ThunderClan.

"Cats of ShadowClan! Gather around before we head to fourtrees!"

Acorndapple quickly gulped down the rest of her mouse before bounding over to the Shade Rock. Lakestar was seated just below it, her usual spot when announcing Gathering patrols.

"As everyone knows, ThunderClan has continued to be at our throats ever since the battle," she said once everyone had finished gathering. "It's obvious they haven't learned their lesson. Tonight we will intimidate them by bringing a strong show of warriors."

She spotted Honeypelt's ears prick eagerly. The warrior, who now bore a large scar across his flank from the battle, was clearly looking forward to slowly getting revenge on the ThunderClan cats who were responsible for his major injury. She recalled the rest of the night after the clan had returned from the battle. Honeypelt had collapsed from bleeding out, after not telling anyone he was suffering from such a severe wound. Only today did the medicine cats allow him to leave their den.

"Our newest warriors will be traveling with us. Not only that, but Fernfur, Beetlepelt, Runningheart, Brownsnout, Goldennewt, and

Brookdaisy will be accompanying us," Lakestar announced.

That's still not a whole lot of warriors, and most of those cats aren't even warriors, she mused. *ShadowClan is quite small.*

Another thought crossed her mind.

She still hasn't brought Shell to a Gathering. Is there a reason behind this?

Acorndapple could already answer her question. She already had a feeling that if Shell were to come along in a Gathering patrol, there would most likely be an uproar in the other clans, most specifically, ThunderClan.

"I can go too." Her mother's sharp voice cut across the clearing, breaking her out of her thoughts.

"If you wish," Lakestar snapped, flattening her ears. Lakestar then rose to her paws and glanced at the moon brightening the star-speckled sky.

"We must not waste any more moonlight. We need to leave now."

At Lakestar's curt tone, the named cats quickly bunched together before following their leader out the entrance.

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A course of excitement ran through her veins as the patrol crested the rise which overlooked fourtrees. The ancient, twisting oaks that shield the clans' gathering spot appeared into view, their vast canopies seemingly scraping the night sky.

Lakestar flicked her tail as a signal, and the clan broke their sacred silence as they raced down the slope into the clearing.

"Hey, don't forget about our competition," Cherryspark said to Beetlepelt as they reached the bushes lining the hollow.

"I haven't."

As Runningheart pestered Beetlepelt about what this 'competition' was, Strawfur glanced at Acorndapple.

"Wanna split up instead? I'll spy on Cherry, and you can do the same for Beetlepelt," he muttered in her ear.

"Yeah let's do that," she muttered back, eyeing the back of Beetlepelt's head. This was the fun about being a warrior: spying on your friends at Gatherings.

As soon as they slipped into the throng of cats, she waved her tail at Strawfur and they broke apart. Instead of slipping around like a snake, she padded around in the most normal manner possible, keeping an eye trained directly on Beetlepelt.

Doing so, she wasn't keeping a very good lookout of the rest of her surroundings. This was proved when she crashed directly into a striped russet tom.

He leaped back as if she was infected with Greencough.

"Ugh, what is it with stupid ShadowClan cats? Fox-hearted furballs who can never watch where they're going." His voice was venomous as he sneered out his words. Then, his hazel eyes sharpened, glancing her over.

"I swear I've seen you before," he muttered.

She narrowed her eyes, glaring at him. Just because of the insults she knew immediately the cat was ThunderClan. Although he did look quite familiar, she had to admit. Where had she seen him before?

Ah, she remembered.

"Belly still rumbling after that squirrel I stole from you?" She snickered. She licked her jaws. "It was quite tasty, I have to admit, eating prey that I didn't have to catch."

His ears flattened.

"Oh, so *you're* the mouse-heart who used that cowardly move.

Typical of ShadowClan though, they're usually too weak to fight properly."

"Says the cat from the clan who practically *lives* in trees," she shot back. "What's your name? Squirrelface?"

"It's Copperleap!" He exclaimed. "I'll have you know Blazestar is pretty awesome at naming warriors. He's *never* named any warrior during his time the suffix 'fur because he knows that's the most basic name *ever*."

She was startled by his sudden change of demeanor but went along anyway. Clearly he liked talking about names.

"Oh, speaking of that," she said with a snort. "Lakestar named my poor brother Straw*fur*."

"Wow, I feel bad for him." Copperleap shook his head, as if deeply disturbed by the name. "Blazestar always puts thought into names to make sure a warrior's name is fitting for them. I'm pretty happy with the name Copperleap, it feels fitting."

Because you enjoy leaping from tree to tree like a squirrel? She wanted to say, but she had already gotten on his good side and didn't want to make him irritated again.

"I'm Acorndapple," she mewed. "I'm pretty sure I was named after my pelt. It's pretty random, honestly. I would have preferred something like 'Acornfang' or 'Acornfire'. Those would've been cool, but I suppose I should come to terms with my name." She sighed. "I'm stuck with it for the rest of my life."

"Unless you become a leader," he pointed out. "Then you could be Acornstar."

"I wouldn't want to be a leader though," she said quickly. "Too much responsibility."

Copperleap's ears pricked with surprise.

"Really? I've always wanted to be a leader." His eyes shone for a second as if imagining himself as a leader. But then, it dimmed

down a little. "My sister has too, unfortunately, so we've always fought about that. Our arguments are always like 'I'll be leader, and you can be deputy!' and, obviously, both of us want to be leader so it spirals on from there...and yeah."

"Seems like a stupid thing to argue about. It's never guaranteed that you'll become leader," she pointed out.

"Yeah, true, but now that I'm a warrior I'm going to try to focus on being more leader-like," he said, lifting his chin a little. "Like leading patrols and stuff, and maybe once Swallowflight's kits are old enough I can mentor one of them!"

"I'll probably still be too young by then," he quickly countered himself. "I was only made a warrior yesterday, so by then I'll only be four moons older. Yeah... I'll have to wait until Ferncurl's kits are apprentices." He sighed.

"Hey, I was made a warrior yesterday too!" She exclaimed. "How coincidental!"

Copperleap's ears twitched.

"Really? That's strange-"

"Hey Copper! Hope you're not breaking the warrior code~" Came a gleeful sing-song voice, causing some cats to glance their way.

"That's the sister I was talking about earlier," he muttered in her ear.

Acorndapple's eyes rounded. It was Sparrowpaw! Although, she probably had her warrior name now.

"Sparrowlight, could you not terribly embarrass me just for a second, please?" Copperleap sighed, glaring at his sister through hazel eyes.

Her whiskers twitched. His words reminded her of Cherryspark.

Sparrowlight's gaze fell across Acorndapple, and it visibly brightened.

"Acornpaw! I haven't seen you since that one border skirmish!" She exclaimed, bounding over to her and sitting enthusiastically at her side. "How's my bud doing?"

"It's Acorndapple now." She grinned. "I got my warrior's name yesterday."

Sparrowlight gasped.

"No way! So did me and this brother here! Wow, that's awesome!"

"'This brother'? Wow, I'm honored," Copperleap snorted. "Aren't I just an utter *burden* in your life that you couldn't even say my real name, huh?"

The light brown tabby flashed a grin at him before turning back to Acorndapple.

"So? Anything super life-changing and special and awesome happen to you? I mean, I see that you're flirting with my brother here, how long has this forbidden relationship been going on?"

"I wasn't flirting with her, I was talking about relatable stuff," Copperleap snapped, rolling his eyes.

"Mhm, I *see*." Sparrowlight looked eager to start drama.

"What about you? What were you doing before you came up to us?" Acorndapple asked. However, she already had a guess.

"Y'know, just talking with that one *super* handsome tom from RiverClan. What was his name again?" She thought for a moment. "Ripplefrost! Right! But there was this *super* annoying tabby that kept flirting with him and just being downright *annoying*. Ugh! I'm pretty sure she was ShadowClan too, know who she is?"

"Oh, that sounds like my sister Cherryspark," she said with an eye-roll. "She and this cat called Beetlepelt are doing a competition to see who can flirt with the most cats before the leaders begin announcements."

"What?! That sounds fun!" Sparrowlight gasped.

"Sparrow, remember that you can still get in trouble with the leader," Copperleap reminded the enthusiastic she-cat.

"Psh, it's the *Gathering*. Plus it's not like I'm about to go into some serious forbidden relationship, obviously."

"Hey! Acorndapple!"

She glanced around at the sound of her brother's voice. He looked confused as he padded over to them.

He glanced suspiciously at her ThunderClan friends.

"I thought you were going to spy on Beetlepelt," he said, looking a little disappointed.

"Sorry, I got carried away," she admitted. "But I'm sure he wouldn't appreciate me watching him the entire Gathering anyway."

"Yeah, true."

Copperleap glanced at Strawfur, tilting his head.

"Are you the Strawfur she was talking about?" He asked.

He nodded. "Why?"

"Oh, alright. I just wanted to give you my condolences for your name, I'd be very disappointed too."

Strawfur blinked in confusion.

"What's wrong with my name?" He asked, sounding a tad bit upset, glancing at Acorndapple for an explanation.

She smiled innocently.

"Don't worry about it, okay?"

"May the Gathering begin!"

They quickly went quiet as Swiftstar yowled the usual Gathering-beginning announcement. She turned to face the leaders, gazing up

at the Great Rock. Strawfur hurriedly settled down next to the three of them but kept a good distance between the ThunderClan warriors.

Swiftstar went ahead and began speaking, seeing that all the other leaders were okay with him going.

"Newleaf has blessed WindClan; prey is bountiful, and our warriors are strong and ready to fight against any threats on our borders," Swiftstar announced. His eyes had a sharp note to it, but he didn't glance at any leader in particular.

Prey is bountiful, he says, she mused, glancing over the WindClan cats. They all looked like fur and bones as if it were Leaf-bare. She found that odd, especially considering it was almost Greenleaf.

"We also have two new apprentices with us tonight. Brightpaw and Curlpaw."

The clans cheered their congratulations for the new apprentices, and Acorndapple murmured her own for the two young cats. It was easy to see them: A silver-and-white she-cat had her chin lifted with pride, while the mottled tom next to her ducked his head with embarrassment.

As the cheering died down, Otterstar stepped forward, her soft amber eyes gazing over the crowd.

"RiverClan has no worries about prey, our bellies are filled and the river is brimming with fish. StarClan has blessed us this season," Otterstar said, her voice gentle. Unlike the other leaders whose voices were sharp and booming, hers was soft and soothing, like a melody of birdsong drifting through her ears.

"We have several apprentices who are accompanying us tonight. I'd like to welcome our newest ones: Pebblepaw, Fernpaw, and Eveningpaw."

As the clans cheered for the new apprentices, Otterstar went on.

"Not only that, but a little bit after the last Gathering I made two new warriors. Ripplefrost and Rapidmist."

The clans broke into cheers once more. She could see Sparrowlight shooting Ripplefrost a dreamy look from across the clearing.

"That is all." Otterstar took a step back and allowed for the next leader to take her place.

It was Lakestar.

"ShadowClan has been stronger than ever," Lakestar yowled, her voice ringing above the throng of cats. "The nursery is crowded with kits, and we also have three new warriors: Cherryspark, Strawfur, and Acorndapple!"

She pricked her ears as the clans around her cheered out their names. However, the cheering wasn't as loud as it was for WindClan and RiverClan, and she suspected this was because of Lakestar's demeanor. But at least Sparrowlight and Copperleap were cheering their names, which she had a feeling were the only ThunderClan cats welcoming them.

"Border patrols have remained steady, and I warn *anyone* who dares to disrespect my clan." Lakestar's gaze focused on Blazestar, who met it unflinchingly.

"ThunderClan has been thriving as well," Blazestar announced loudly, not bothering to wait for Lakestar to say that she was finished. Lakestar huffed loudly and took a step back, glaring at the golden tabby through cobalt eyes.

"Swallowflight has given birth recently to a healthy litter of four kits, and more are to be expected soon as our mediator, Ferncurl, is currently in the nursery."

Blazestar didn't wait for any murmurs of congratulations and went on.

"Not only that, but ThunderClan welcomes three new warriors into the clan. Sparrowlight, Copperleap, and Clovershade. Snailpaw is also expected to complete his medicine cat training soon, so perhaps next moon a full medicine cat will be within our ranks."

She made sure to join the cheering for her friends. Sparrowlight and

Copperleap had their heads raised with pride. A second later Copperleap leaned toward her ear and murmured, "Clovershade and Snailpaw are our other siblings."

She nodded, gaze searching around the clearing for the other two siblings. She could not find Clovershade but could see Snailpaw seated with the other medicine cats, a little black tom. His head was dipped humbly.

"One last thing," Blazestar called, causing the cheering to quiet down and ears to prick, eager to hear more news.

"ThunderClan, as always, does not tolerate any prey stealing." She was surprised to see Blazestar's gaze flick to Swiftstar rather than Lakestar. "My warriors are prepared to attack if necessary. We do not provide sympathy for any clan that is starving, especially if they are causing *us* to go into famine because of their prey-stealing."

"Yeah, WindClan! Stay on your side of the border!" Someone yowled.

Swifstar rose to his full height.

"That's quite an accusation, Blazestar," he hissed, his voice icy. Then, he gazed around the clearing at the many cats, addressing them.

"Isn't it strange that almost every Gathering, Blazestar *always* has something to say about prey-stealing, eh?" His gaze flickered over to Lakestar. "I'm sure Lakestar can understand my words, especially because her clan has also been falsely accused by his *flimsy* cover-up for his own prey-stealing that he has launched across the clans."

There were yowls of outrage. WindClan and ShadowClan were turning against ThunderClan, hissing and spitting. RiverClan, on the other hand, remained neutral, although they quickly bunched together in their own group.

Strawfur quickly sidled away from them and hurried over to Cherryspark.

"I should probably go too," she said apologetically to Sparrowlight

and Copperleap, her ears flat against her head.

They both nodded in understanding before she hurried off, following Strawfur.

"I'd like to point out that WindClan is basically *starving*," the ThunderClan leader yowled, his eyes narrowed to slits. "They've resorted to stealing our prey because of how hungry they are! Look!"

"RiverClan, we're leaving! We remain faithful to StarClan and will not be deceived by petty skirmishes!" Otterstar called, gathering up her clan quickly with a wave of her tail. They left hurriedly, leaving behind the three raging clans.

"We starve because *you* steal our prey!" Swiftstar yowled, turning to Blazestar and hissing furiously, completely ignoring the fact that the Gathering was basically over.

"It will remain unknown who's prey is stealing who's!" Lakestar's voice boomed over the cats. "For all we know, ShadowClan will stand alone and continue to fight against ThunderClan's treachery! ShadowClan, to me!"

The clouds overhead were already gathering quickly; StarClan was clearly angry. Even the mediators' desperate attempts to calm the angry clans weren't working, and it seemed that the last resort was for their ancestors to end the fighting.

As ShadowClan quickly headed toward the entrance, she shot one last look at her two ThunderClan friends. She knew that they were enemies now as the Gathering had ended, but she didn't think it was wrong to wish them a silent *good luck*, as she had a feeling that the next few moons would be swept up into war.

Chapter Sixteen

Acorndapple walked alongside her fellow clanmates, padding through the undergrowth with alert senses as she searched for signs of prey. Goldpelt was in the lead, with she, Fernfur, and Shell following after him.

"I can already tell Greenleaf will be nice, without any droughts and such," Shell said to her quietly, clearly not wanting to scare away any prey. "The weather has been nice. I remember when I was younger there were always droughts during Greenleaf."

Fernfur, overhearing her, said, "It seems StarClan has blessed us this year. Perhaps seeing my new kits has made them feel kinder to us with the weather."

Shell nodded.

"Of course, and I'm sure you feel even more blessed to have brought such lovely kits during a prey-bountiful time," she purred.

"Indeed, I've never felt more lucky. The seasons ahead are already looking good for ShadowClan," Fernfur went on.

What about the three kits who are now warriors? Do you feel blessed and lucky about that? She wanted to ask. It was pitiful to admit, but she couldn't help but feel her parents often forgot about her and her littermates with their new litter now being their sole focus- especially Fernfur, who seemed obsessed with the little tomkit in the litter: Luckkit.

"Perhaps now that ThunderClan seems to be more focused on WindClan rather than us, maybe we'll get some peace," Acorndapple said instead.

Shell nodded. "It's a good thing Lakestar decided for us to leave the Gathering before-"

"Quiet, there's a mouse burrow up ahead," Goldpelt's voice cut across them.

They quickly lowered to a crouch. Acorndapple could see a few mice scuttling about through the grasses. A small pile of dirt marked where the burrow should be.

"I'll scare them into their burrow first, and then everyone can surround it," Goldpelt said, his voice hardly more than a whisper.

They nodded before Goldpelt lunged towards one of the mice, trapping it beneath his paws. The other mice darted into their burrow, several frantic squeaks filling the air before it quieted.

After giving the mouse a killing bite and shoving it under a nearby bush, he flicked his tail as a signal for the rest of the patrol to surround the burrow. She spread out a little distance away from Shell, keeping her body flat against the ground and her tail as still as possible.

Then, Goldpelt slammed his paw on the ground near the burrow. There were more squeaks of terror as a dozen of them raced out, zigzagging as they realized several cats surrounded their escape routes. With a yowl she lunged forward, slamming her paw down on one, before quickly hooking her claws into another that was about to escape. Several more escaped after a desperate attempt to catch them, but after getting two more she realized the other members in her patrol had also caught a decent amount. Shell had three hanging by the tails in her jaws, Goldpelt had two, and Fernfur also had two.

"Looks like the clan won't be going hungry tonight," said Goldpelt between a mouthful of fur, his purr rumbling in the air. The others agreed happily, purring with content.

"Before we head back to camp, could we head to that area between WindClan's border and the Carrionplace? Drystreak loves lizard, and I've found that there's always a lot in that area," said Fernfur, dropping his mice at his paws.

"Let's do that. We'll bury the mice here and grab them on the way

back," said the deputy with a nod.

She quickly scraped up the dirt with her paws, dropping her catches in the small hole she had created. Once everyone was finished, and Goldpelt had marked the area with a large stick, they moved on in that direction.

"Perhaps the kits can also have their first taste of prey," Fernfur was saying as they trekked through the pines.

"Hopefully they'll like lizard," Acorndapple mused. "I've never liked it, personally. Frog and toad is okay, but lizard just grosses me out."

"The dislike of lizard came from me, I'm sure," Fernfur snorted. "Never liked it either."

Shell was glancing at both of them with surprise.

"Really? Lizard is delicious!"

The three of them chattered incessantly before they eventually reached the area that Fernfur had been speaking about. But as they drew closer, she could make out faint yowling in the distance.

Clearly, the rest of the patrol heard that too, growing silent with pricked ears and watchful eyes.

"Hear that?" Asked Goldpelt, his ears twitching.

"Yeah, it sounds like it's coming from the WindClan border," she said.

"You don't have any patrols over there, do you?" Asked Fernfur, looking slightly anxious.

"I assigned a border patrol near the ThunderClan border, but they should be back home by now," he replied. "We should probably go check it out anyway, just in case."

There were no questions asked as the four of them hurried in the direction of WindClan's border. Just like the ThunderClan border, the territory line was marked by the Thunderpath. But as they drew

to the clearing next to the border, they found that the source of the yowling was coming from directly *in* WindClan's territory.

She gazed out into the moor, eyes flicking over the sea of heather coursing through WindClan's territory.

"Look, there," said Shell, waving her tail in the area between fourtrees and the moor. The she-cat had always had sharp eyesight.

There, where she was pointing, were a large group of cats locked in battle, yowls careening off the moor. Because of how far away they were, the silhouettes were dark and unrecognizable, but it was clear at least what clans they were.

"Looks like ThunderClan and WindClan fighting," Fernfur snorted, speaking her thoughts out loud. "How unexpected."

"Hmm." Goldpelt's eyes were thoughtful as he gazed at the fighting cats.

"We'll have to report this to Lakestar, she would want to know about this. Let's hurry up and finish the hunt, then we'll head back," the deputy finally said after a long moment.

They dipped their heads. Acorndapple cast one glance back at WindClan's territory before hurriedly following her patrol deeper into the pines.

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As soon as they returned to camp, they dropped their catches in the pile. Their lizard-hunting had ended up pretty successful, finding a plentiful amount scuttling about in the crevices of rocks littered across the ground. While Acorndapple had not caught any, still not accustomed to hunting the swift reptiles, Fernfur had caught three, happily holding them in his jaws.

"I'll go tell Lakestar about this myself," said Goldpelt. By the serious note in his voice, Acorndapple had a feeling she would be eavesdropping on this conversation.

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"Lakestar."

Goldpelt stood at the entrance of her den, peering inside. He blinked rapidly as he adjusted to the dimmer lighting.

"Come in," she snapped.

He let out a small sigh before stepping inside, brushing past the moss that padded the stone walls of the den. Lakestar was curled up in her nest, while Pigeonsilk lounged nearby in a small pool of sunshine cast by a crack through one of the rocks. He had almost forgotten the two were mates; they had always kept that pretty hidden from the rest of the clan.

Pigeonsilk, clearly sensing the serious atmosphere that Goldpelt was bringing in, quickly rose to his paws, dipping his head respectfully as he walked by before exiting the den.

"Do you really have to report right now? It's basically Sun-high, a leader needs rest," she grumbled, not before letting out a huge yawn.

He let out another sigh, settling down on the ground. These past moons Lakestar's demeanor only seemed to get more irritated. There were times when he wondered whether the she-cat even wanted to be leader, but he already knew asking her about stepping down would offend her immensely. She was young, so she wouldn't even consider giving up such a major role.

"It's important," he insisted, shaking his head to break out of his thoughts.

Lakestar let out a huge sigh, sitting up in her nest.

"Fine, but it better be something that could actually affect the clan," she muttered.

"It is," he promised. "As my hunting patrol was going near the WindClan border, we heard yowling. As we went to investigate, turns out WindClan and ThunderClan were having a battle on the moor."

Lakestar grinned, much to his surprise.

"This is *great*! Finally, our clan can live in peace without ThunderClan at our throats. Clearly, they're too focused on WindClan now to bother us." Her eyes were pleased. "The clan will feast tonight to celebrate!"

Goldpelt's tail twitched with frustration.

"No, Lakestar. This could be much more serious."

Lakestar curled her lip.

"At this point, you're just desperate for more battles."

He was silent for a moment, trying to control his anger as it jabbed at his nerves. He had learned to stay calm when Lakestar was first made leader because clearly, it was pointless to get angry with her. Things only escalated from there.

"I just believe ShadowClan is at risk with two fighting clans at our border," he said in a controlled, leveled voice.

"*How*?" Lakestar sneered, incredulous. "You're just proving my point here that you want a battle."

"Because Blazestar is power-hungry!" His tail lashed. "One of those clans will come looking for an alliance with us, and we'll be caught right in the war! Or, like I said a second ago, power-hungry Blazestar might decide to steal some of *our* land for more prey!"

"You're taking something that shouldn't even affect us and turning it into something more serious so then I can stress about it!" Lakestar snarled, her fangs flashing. "I've heard enough. Leave the den, or I'll start considering your retirement."

Is there any point in this anymore? He wondered, but still pushed on.

"I believe it's foolish to look past this. ShadowClan should be on high alert, at the very least." He gazed at her, hoping for her to understand.

Lakestar rose to her paws, her glare as sharp as flint. He met it unflinchingly.

"*No*. That's my final answer."

Chapter Seventeen

Acorndapple quickly darted over to the fresh-kill pile so the deputy wouldn't suspect that she had been eavesdropping the entire time as he padded out of the den. His ears were lying flat across his head, and his eyes were unreadable.

"I saw you listening to them. What did they say?"

Strawfur's presence caused her to practically leap in surprise. He was standing right next to her, and she hadn't even noticed.

"Oops." She looked over guiltily once she had calmed down. "I didn't think I was that obvious about it."

Strawfur shrugged, still looking curious.

"Well?" He insisted.

She first delved into the entire ordeal with her patrol, telling him about how they had found both WindClan and ThunderClan fighting, before moving on to what she had overheard by the leader's den.

"Goldpelt was saying that he felt worried about two fighting clans on the border, and Lakestar just said ShadowClan was finally at peace because ThunderClan was focused on WindClan now." She took a breath. "But Goldpelt said we should stay on high alert in case we get attacked. But I didn't get to hear the rest because I ran away."

Strawfur flicked his tail, looking thoughtful.

"I've never liked ThunderClan. Never trusted those squirrel-cats," he said after a moment. "So yeah, I think Goldpelt is right, and we should be watching the border because ThunderClan could attack."

"Not all of ThunderClan is bad," she said, a little guiltily. She was thinking of her ThunderClan friends.

"Maybe not, but they killed Sleetpath remember?" Strawfur reminded her.

Acorndapple felt even more guilty.

"Yeah, true."

"I trust WindClan a lot more," Strawfur went on. "Out of all the clans they've always been the nicest to us at the Gatherings. Also, I heard a long time ago when Sleetpath was infected with yellowcough they gave us some lungwort."

Acorndapple had almost forgotten about that. She recalled the one time she was in the medicine den because of a thorn in her paw, and she had overheard the medicine cats talking about WindClan kindly sparing the herb.

"I'm sure that if Lakestar ever decided to participate in the war, WindClan would be our ally," she mewed, agreeing to his words.

"Although when I overheard her in her den she seemed more eager to stand alone and have peace," she quickly countered.

"When war arrives, you don't have a choice," Strawfur said gravely, his eyes dark.

She couldn't help but snicker at his sudden change of mood.

"Destruction and bloodshed is inevitable," she said dramatically.

"Dear StarClan, help us all!" Strawfur gasped, his eyes twinkling. He collapsed to the ground as if fainting.

She took the opportunity to snatch the raven he had been eating and wolfed down the rest of it. As soon as he got up again, she quickly pushed the remains behind her and blinked at him innocently.

He stared at her, his eyes dark with suspicion, while she simply gazed back with an innocent, cheerful smile on her face. That was when her stomach made an angry rumble, and he realized the crime she had committed.

"How dare you!" He pounced on her and knocked her to the ground.

She growled playfully and kicked lightly at his stomach, but he wouldn't budge.

"This is... *outrageous!*" He exclaimed. "You owe me...hmmm." He stepped back, allowing her to scramble to her paws as he glared off into space thoughtfully.

"Look, Strawfur, in complete seriousness and honesty, I was really just doing you a favor." She blinked, fighting to keep a straight face. "I've overheard clanmates talking about how...well....how should I word this?"

"About how awesome I am?"

"Hm... not quite. It seems that you've taken on a bit of... weight recently."

"I'm glad you noticed!" Strawfur exclaimed. "All this weight? Muscle."

Acorndapple snorted.

"Keep telling yourself that."

"I sure will." Strawfur grinned. "Anyway, if you don't mind, I'm taking my Sun-high nap, it's *way* overdue."

"Of course you are," she muttered under her breath as her brother ambled his way over to a sunny patch of ground, just before settling down and lounging under the warmth of the sun's rays.

She glanced around the clearing, observing her clanmates while also wondering what to do. Goldpelt was curled in a ball beneath the Shade Rock, his eyes dark as he stared forward almost lifelessly. She quickly glanced away and continued to look around the camp. Chaffinchflare was lazing outside the elder's den, the tom now an elder after recently announcing his retirement.

Unsurprisingly, a pawful of cats dotted the clearing, enticed by the warmth of the sunny day. Brownsnout and Goldennewt were

chatting outside the warrior's den, and Cherryspark and Brookdaisy were engaged in a conversation slightly close to where Acorndapple was. Across the clearing, Shell rested in the shade near the medicine den.

Deciding to go talk to the she-cat, she began to make her way over to her, passing by her sister and the permanent queen. Cherryspark waved her tail as she passed, but Brookdaisy's eyes narrowed into a glare, eyes as sharp as flint as he stared at Acorndapple. Her tail began to flick crossly.

He acts like I'm a walking piece of fox-dung!

She shot a glare back and continued her way over to Shell, silently wondering what she had ever done to cause the tomcat to act in such a rude manner towards her.

Shell blinked up at her as she approached. Her yellow eyes were welcoming like a flowering meadow, blooming with gleaming dandelions.

"Hello, Acorndapple," Shell purred, looking content as she lounged in the shade. "Anything new?"

She shot a glance over her shoulder at Brookdaisy, who was still engaged in a conversation with her sister. She quickly glanced back, a frown marring her face.

"Do you know anything about Brookdaisy?" She hissed quietly. "He acts like he hates me, and I've never done anything wrong to him! Do you have an idea?"

Shell glanced from her to Brookdaisy across the clearing.

"Have you said anything to him before that upset him?"

"I haven't hardly ever said a word to him in my entire life," she snapped.

Shell's eyes rounded sympathetically.

"It must mean someone was talking badly about you to him," she

said quietly. "There's no other reason that I could think of."

She flattened her ears. *Who could possibly be insulting me behind my back?*

She glanced around the clearing. Perhaps Pigeonsilk as he was Brookdaisy's brother, but she had also hardly ever spoken to the tom.

Cherryspark *was* talking to him right now...

But we're sisters, and we've been close for so long! Why would she do that?

"It's probably better not to worry about it right now. If he doesn't like you then that's okay," Shell said gently, sympathy still lingering in her eyes.

"Alright," she muttered. Despite Shell's words, she had a feeling that the mystery would still linger in her mind. Even more so who was spreading gossip about her behind her back.

She decided to start talking about something else in an attempt to take her mind off of it.

"I was going to tell you that earlier when Goldpelt went to report to Lakestar, I may have eavesdropped and heard a few things that I thought were interesting."

Shell pricked her ears, looking intrigued.

"And what would that be?"

She went over the entire spiel of what she had heard once again, talking about how Goldpelt had wanted ShadowClan to stay on higher alert with the two fighting clans at the border. But Lakestar, of course, refused.

"Hmm, interesting," Shell mused.

The she-cat looked a little thoughtful, but then after a moment asked, "It feels like I'm missing a piece of information... you know, I

never got to hear what happened at the Gathering."

"Oh." Acorndapple had almost forgotten that Shell had never gone to the Gathering. She quickly began to explain.

"I thought the Gathering would be pretty peaceful honestly, everyone at first had great news to share. But then Blazestar began to share, and he started accusing WindClan of prey-stealing." She took a breath and went on. "Swiftstar kind of sided with Lakestar since ShadowClan had also been a victim of ThunderClan's accusations. Of course, everything escalated from there and eventually, we all left before a major fight happened."

"Ah, that makes a lot more sense," she said. "So it seems ThunderClan is angry at WindClan now. Honestly, I understand what Lakestar means. Blazestar is far too busy dealing with WindClan at the moment to bother us. I think we should enjoy this peace while we can."

She nodded, seeing the truth in Shell's words. But she still felt uncertain, Goldpelt's words ringing absently in her mind.

I'm not sure how long this 'peace' will last with ThunderClan and WindClan in the middle of a war.

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Settled on a small rise overlooking a small section of ShadowClan's pines, she realized how much more often she should take these night-time strolls. She had seen several cats doing it before, only now that she was a warrior did she decide to sneak off into the pines in the middle of the night. It was refreshing, having the quiet moment to clear her mind and enjoy the star-lit surroundings.

Acorndapple's ears twitched as she heard paw-steps loudly, and seemingly carelessly, stepping on twig clutter littered across the ground. Her fur lay flat-she could already assume it was Shell as she still hadn't mastered the art of ShadowClan's stealth.

"Hi, Shell," she said without glancing behind her. The paw steps faltered; clearly, Shell wasn't expecting her to notice her approach.

"What are you doing at this time of night?" Acorndapple went on when Shell was still silent.

"Who's Shell?"

Acorndapple shot to her paws, spinning around. The cat wasn't Shell. Not even a clanmate.

"*Sparrowlight?* What are you doing here?!"

She realized that she should probably try to look angry-a fierce warrior defending her clan. But it was difficult, especially when she still saw Sparrowlight as a friend.

Sparrowlight's eyes were huge and fearful, and she kept shooting glances around as if an enemy warrior lurked nearby.

"I had to warn you." There was a slight tremor in her voice. "It's been so awful-"

Sparrowlight's voice broke off, her head hanging down. Acorndapple watched her, her eyes owlish.

"About...what?" She questioned as Sparrowlight continued to be silent.

"I'm so sorry... it's just so awful," she choked out. "ThunderClan and WindClan are allies now and they're-"

She took a breath.

"-going to attack on the Half-Moon."

"*What?*"

"I'm so sorry," Sparrowlight whispered, meeting her eyes once again. "I don't agree with this at all. If there was any way I could, I would stop this."

A gut-wrenching feeling of doom slowly began to twist through her body, making her heart race and her head dizzy. She knew with certainty now that this was ShadowClan's fate. Outnumbered by a

tide of warriors. Acorndapple just sighed, shutting her eyes tightly. Two clans against one, which was already short on warriors? She couldn't shake the impending feeling that she and her clan would not live to see the next moon.

"Why? What did ShadowClan ever do to WindClan?" She said finally, breaking the silence.

"ThunderClan and WindClan came to an agreement," Sparrowlight mewed with her owlish eyes. "Their rabbits are dying off because of a disease so they need more hunting grounds."

"So ThunderClan had to get involved and suggest using our land to hunt?! Why does it have to be ShadowClan?"

"Perhaps it's because your clan has the largest territory," Sparrowlight offered weakly.

Acorndapple lashed her tail mutely. She couldn't understand ThunderClan's sudden change of perspective. Allied with WindClan and more than ready to destroy ShadowClan. What was *wrong* with them?

She wanted to lash out. Sink her claws into something. Yowl at the top of her lungs hopelessly into the trees.

"I'm sorry," Sparrowlight said quietly once again, looking even more anxious as she shot glances around. "I have to go back. But please, for your own sake warn your clanmates. I can't stand by and let an entire clan die when I could've done something."

She tore away clumps of grass absently. She didn't know how she could possibly warn her clanmates. *She* would be put to blame for befriending Sparrowlight. But, of course, she *had* to tell them, or they would be hopelessly defeated

"Goodbye," Sparrowlight mewed.

She didn't speak a word, not even exchanging another goodbye as Sparrowlight darted into the trees and raced in the direction of ThunderClan's territory, her striped pelt soon vanishing in the darkness.

Chapter Eighteen

The golden tabby was seated inside the den, his pale yellow eyes shadowed by the darkness of the den. Facing him a tail-length away was a thin silver and white tabby tom, green eyes dull with hardly a prick of light gleaming through them. They were both engaged in a serious conversation. A conversation that could mean war.

Suddenly, a new voice cut across the two cats, along with the sound of paw steps skipping up the large boulders leading up to the den.

"*Oh Blazestar!*" The voice sang.

Swifstar glanced at Blazestar with question, his green eyes narrowed.

"My granddaughter," Blazestar muttered as a reply through clenched fangs.

Sparrowlight bounded up the last set of boulders, the lichen dangling at the entrance of the den brushing against her shoulder blades as she trotted inside the den, doe-brown eyes quickly adjusting to the gloom.

"You won't believe it! I did it!" She exclaimed, her eyes bright. She ambled over to Blazestar and sat next to him eagerly.

"Did what?" Swifstar leaned forward a bit, looking mildly interested.

"I told Acorndapple the lie," Sparrowlight announced, puffing out her chest. "She totally believes me now!"

"She made a little friend in ShadowClan. I've ordered Sparrowlight to go and tell her the wrong plan so then ShadowClan will be caught off guard on the day we really attack," Blazestar explained.

"Ah, I see," Swifstar said quietly.

Sparrowlight glanced between the two of them, her paws twitching

restlessly on the floor of the den.

"Can I know the real plan now?" She asked when both leaders were still silent. Blazestar had promised to tell her once she got on with the mission.

Of course, she had never *told* her grandfather that Acorndapple was her little ShadowClan friend, and she hadn't even expected to *use* the friendship in the first place. But after the last Gathering, Blazestar had told her that he had noticed her speaking with Acorndapple, and formed a plan to use that friendship against ShadowClan. She thought that was a *splendid* idea and happily went along with it. Now, Acorndapple thought ThunderClan and WindClan would attack on the Half-Moon, but they were completely mistaken!

Swifstar's jaw was set. It was as if he were leaning to say no, yet he had no say. She knew, with a slight grin, that if he were to intervene and potentially get himself on Blazestar's bad side, then their alliance could be broken. It was more than clear that ThunderClan could easily overpower WindClan if they needed to. Plus, the moor-dwelling cats were already weakened by starvation.

Blazestar looked thoughtful but began to slowly nod his head.

"Our plan seems stable, and we've planned far enough in advance. Wouldn't you agree, Swiftstar? It does no harm to tell our clans the plan."

His gaze was scraping Swifstar's. His voice seemed to hold a hidden warning to it, words that she could easily guess.

"Of course," Swifstar muttered finally.

Sparrowlight was surprised that he could even continue holding his gaze with Blazestar. She had to admit, he was an intimidating cat. Swifstar, on the other paw, was a *coward*. She was sure that this show of confidence was all simply an act.

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Sparrowlight skipped out of the den, grinning ear-to-ear. The

interaction had only inflated her ego. She was now entirely sure that she was Blazestar's most trusted warrior.

Who was chosen to go on a special mission? Me. Who knows about the plan before the rest of the clan? Me.

Even with that, it was hard to deny the slightest prick of remorse. She had taken a slight mutual trust, grown it, and twisted it to her own advantage. But it was so *easy*, almost addictive in a way. Everything fell into her place so perfectly that she craved for more.

She was approached by Copperleap as she bounded down the remaining boulders piling at High Rock. His dark ginger pelt was flecked by dirt, and she narrowed her eyes with suspicion.

"What was that all about?"He spoke. His hazel eyes held a note of skepticism, and she felt herself fluffing out her pelt defensively.

"It's nothing you should worry about," she snapped. She flexed her claws a bit eagerly, enjoying the fact that she held a bit of knowledge that he was completely unaware of.

"Using a friendship is wrong, Sparrowlight, and you know that."

She flattened her ears with shock, curling her lip. *He overheard!*

"It was completely unnecessary to do that, and you know it! ShadowClan still would not have known we were going to attack them even if you hadn't 'warned' her!" Copperleap went on without waiting for her to reply, his eyes blazing. "Why are you acting like such a fox-heart lately?"

"You shouldn't have eavesdropped," she finally said through clenched fangs. "None of this was your business."

Copperleap shook his head in disgust.

"I can tell you're still desperate for that leadership role, Sparrowlight, and it's disgusting. Yeah, so am I, but I'm not taking these measures to prove myself to my grandfather."

"Shut up, Copperleap, you've never done *anything* to try to be more

'*leader-like*'," she muttered, lashing her tail.

Copperleap just stared at her, his eyes flaming.

"I hope you realize that what you're doing is wrong."

He stormed away, his russet-tabby pelt vanishing through the warrior's den. Sparrowlight only gazed after him, digging her claws into the ground furiously.

Chapter Nineteen

Acorndapple has been delaying it all day. Her mind was reeling with anxiousness to the point where she couldn't grasp a single concept of how she would possibly deal this out.

How would she warn Lakestar without revealing the fact that her friend was a ThunderClan cat? She would want to know where the information came from. If she told her, Lakestar had reason to believe that in the future if roles were switched Acorndapple could betray ShadowClan to return the favor.

But, if she didn't warn Lakestar, her clan could be torn apart. The rival clans had two advantages over them: surprise and numbers. ShadowClan could at least stand a chance if they knew when the attack would take place.

So if she didn't say anything, she would be tormented by an everlasting guilt.

As she paced restlessly, her tail swishing to and fro, she almost bumped into Hazyfall. She apologized multiple times, licking her chest fur with embarrassment. Her aunt, the sister of Drystreak, had scolded her and her siblings quite harshly *a lot* when they were younger. Now, she quietly held a mixture of fear and respect for the much older she-cat.

"I see you have a lot on your mind," spoke Hazyfall, seemingly unbothered by Acorndapple's lack of awareness as she shrouded her with a calculating gaze.

"Yes...yes, I do," she stammered, blinking rapidly.

Hazyfall tilted her head a little.

"You can always speak about it if you'd like. Trapped thoughts elongate over time."

She paused for a moment. Hazyfall was a mediator; she would have good advice. But she couldn't tell her what she was truly worried about... *unless* she was pretty vague about it.

"Well...I'm in a situation where if I don't say anything, then everything could go wrong. Then, I'll feel guilty forever that I could've done something." She took a breath. "But if I do say something, then I could be deemed untrustworthy."

Hazyfall blinked a bit, clearly processing the entire spiel she had just thrown at her.

"That sounds like a... tricky situation," she began, her bronze gaze flicking over her. "I understand if you don't want to tell me *exactly* what's going on... and I won't push for it."

Acorndapple nodded, absently drawing her claw over the dirt.

"It sounds like not saying anything outweighs the consequences for saying something. Well, whatever it is that you need to do, go say something because clearly everything going wrong sounds quite awful, does it not?" Hazyfall said reasonably.

"You're right," she said. Then, she dipped her head just before hurrying off, giving a quick, "Thank you."

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Acorndapple cleared her throat awkwardly, standing at the entrance of her den. Her ears burned, praying to StarClan that no one in the clearing was watching her.

"Is someone there?" Lakestar's irritated voice snapped, echoing through the den. She flinched a little.

"Um..." She silently wished the ground would envelop her and drag her into the void. "Can I speak with you? It's Acorndapple."

She's probably wondering why me, out of all cats, is wanting to speak to her!

"You can enter." There was a note of surprise hidden in Lakestar's

voice, which only fed into her embarrassment.

She quickly hurried inside, ears burning, and awkwardly shuffled to stand in a spot a little close to the entrance inside the cave. Lakestar was cleaning her pelt but paused as she entered, looking her up and down.

"Do you have something to report?" Her cobalt gaze was unreadable, although Acorndapple was relieved at the very least to see that she did not take an irritated tone into her voice which she often used with other cats.

"I..." She quickly took a breath. "I just thought I could tell you something important. Because um... well for obvious reasons... because cats can die and stuff."

She wished she had worded it better as Lakestar narrowed her eyes.

"Go on."

"Er... well you see..." Her heart began to race as she fought to create a lie. "The other night I was taking a walk near the ThunderClan border, and I heard voices."

The lie was slipping out easily now, and she began to enjoy how effortlessly it left her mouth in almost an addictive way.

"Of course, it didn't sound like any regular cats talking. I thought I could recognize the voice of Blazestar. It sounded important... even *dangerous* in a way, and I knew I had to eavesdrop on this conversation.

"So I trespassed. I snuck into some bushes and saw Blazestar and Swifstar speaking to each other. Turns out they had made an alliance and instead of fighting each other they wanted to take ShadowClan land for more hunting grounds."

At this point, she was being truthful, *except* for the part where the information came from in the first place.

She didn't wait for Lakestar to react and quickly went on.

"I overheard the whole plan. They were planning to attack us on the night of the Half-Moon so we would be more vulnerable."

She took a breath after she finished, watching Lakestar before her cautiously. Now she had to hope that she wouldn't get in trouble for 'trespassing'.

In the long moment Lakestar was silent, she was convinced her heart would burst out of her chest from how rapidly it was beating.

"Are you sure you heard right?" Lakestar muttered. She noticed the leader's claws were digging into her moss-woven nest.

"I'm completely sure," she mewed. There was a slight quiver in her voice. *What if she doesn't believe me?*

Once again, Lakestar fell silent. Her tail was flicking, clearly conflicted, and her gaze was unreadable. Then, she let out a huge sigh, that almost caused Acorndapple to leap back in surprise, much to her embarrassment.

"Well this sounds lovely," Lakestar muttered, her claws unsheathing and sheathing. "Who does Blazestar think he is, allying with his enemy? Ha! I'm sure his ancestors are looking down on him, shaking his head at his stupidity. Completely forgetting all of the horrible things WindClan has done to ThunderClan in the past? Sounds like him. More so thinking he can claim an entire *pine* forest? The frog-brain already has a giant oak forest, what more could he possibly need? I bet that fat toad ran out of prey because he's been eating it all, that's why he needs more hunting grounds!"

Acorndapple's ears twitched, pelt prickling uncomfortably. She wasn't sure if she was supposed to hear the entire rant that Lakestar had just burst out, especially because she was staring at the den wall with flaming eyes, muttering to herself.

"I'll leave now," she said awkwardly, beginning to rise to her paws and hurry out to the clearing.

"Look, I'll do something about this," Lakestar snapped, causing her to halt in her tracks and glance back. "I'm just pretty stressed out,

okay? Have some sympathy for a leader."

"A-alright," she stuttered, backing out of the den.

She breathed a huge sigh of relief as soon as she left the stuffiness of the leader's cave.

At least she believes me, that's all that matters, she thought, shoulders loosening with relief. *But great StarClan, being a leader must be awful! That role seems to be driving her mad!*

Leadership is for a cat suited to handle its pressures, said a wiser voice in the back of her mind. It was familiar, most likely a quote said by Beetlepelt.

I'm sure Lakestar can handle it, perhaps it's just the war has been very demanding, especially for a leader who needs to make a lot of decisions regarding it.

She was conflicted, that was for sure. Sometimes she couldn't help but question Lakestar.

Chapter Twenty

//**warning: heavy descriptions of gore**//

"All cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath Shade Rock for a clan meeting."

Acorndapple's ears pricked, and her heart thudded nervously in her chest. The fear had been lingering of whether or not Lakestar *truly* believed her, despite already clarifying that she did, but it made her much more relieved to see her leader jump to action and begin doing something about her warning.

She remained at Strawfur's side as they padded toward the center of the clearing and settled down. Cherryspark darted away from conversing with Brookdaisy and joined the two of them, who Acorndapple shot a wary glare to in the process.

She noticed Goldpelt shooting a questioning glance up at Lakestar as the clan finished gathering. Her ears twitched with surprise. *Did she not tell him about what the meeting is for?*

Lakestar didn't meet his probing stare and instead continued to gaze down at her clanmates, pale sunlight poking through the gathering clouds, shifting a partial bit of her dark blue eyes to a shade of cerulean.

"Cats of ShadowClan, the war that has lasted between us and ThunderClan has only grown worse. Today we must prepare for battle, but not with just ThunderClan, but also WindClan."

"*WindClan?*" Cats were muttering with confusion.

"Yes. Acorndapple has found out that ThunderClan and WindClan have formed an alliance and will be attacking us on the night of the Half-Moon. *Tonight.*"

She shrunk inwardly in her pelt as gazes turned to stare at her with surprise.

"How did you know?" Strawfur asked her quietly, cobalt eyes rounded.

"Yeah, how did *she* know?" Asked Brookdaisy loudly, clearly overhearing Strawfur as he stared at her with cold eyes.

The entire clan was watching her silently, waiting for her to answer. Even Lakestar.

Great StarClan, is she going to make me repeat the whole *story to* everyone*?!*

She was on the verge of panicking, but Lakestar quickly began to speak again. Mentally, she let out a huge sigh of relief.

"She overheard both Blazestar and Swifstar discussing the plan," Lakestar said sharply. "They have mouse-brained intentions to steal *ShadowClan* land because they're *starving*. They're using a cowardly tactic to go and attack us when we're most vulnerable."

"I see, so they plan to attack when both medicine cats are absent?" Chasingfur mused thoughtfully out loud.

"Yes," Lakestar growled, her tail lashing furiously.

"I'm sure StarClan would understand if we skipped tonight's Half-Moon meeting," Shrikestripe said, her voice soft and eyes wide and owlish with concern. Both medicine cats exchanged glances, and Acorndapple could've sworn she caught a dark, unspoken message lingering in both of their gazes.

"Then both of you will remain in camp, and everyone must prepare for their ambush, *including* queens and mediators." Lakestar's gaze flicked over Brownsnout, Goldennewt, Pigeonsilk, and Brookdaisy. "This evening I will begin stationing guards at the entrance and the training grounds entrance. For now, Goldpelt can organize battle training sessions, and everyone else can go about regular duties as usual."

Lakestar leaped off the Shade Rock and waved her tail as a signal for the clan to be dismissed.

The moment the meeting was over, Cherryspark and Strawfur turned to her almost in sync.

"Where and how did you overhear Swiftstar and Blazestar scheming?" Cherryspark demanded.

"At the Gathering, perhaps?" Strawfur mused.

Acorndapple sighed, anxiously flicking her tail. What she was more worried about was accidentally retelling the lie differently from before, so instead she just shook her head dismissively.

"I hope we'll be able to hold off against two clans," she mewed, trying to change the subject. Clearly, it worked and they exchanged anxious looks.

"I heard a story of something similar to this happening *ages* ago, but it was with RiverClan, ThunderClan, and ShadowClan," spoke Strawfur. "ThunderClan and RiverClan were at war over Sunningrocks, and ThunderClan was weakening. ThunderClan allied with ShadowClan, and it ended with RiverClan surrendering. So in all, things are looking pretty bleak for us."

"Way to give us hope," Acorndapple muttered.

Cherryspark snorted, scoring her claws across the ground.

"I doubt a bunch of starved *WindClan* cats could possibly beat me in a fight," she boasted, flexing her muscles. "Those cats are built like twigs!"

"Try taking on five WindClan cats at once, see how that ends for you," Acorndapple said, rolling her eyes.

"And then when I do, you'll realize you were a mouse-brain for being scared of a whole bunch of twig cats anyway," Cherryspark retorted.

"No, I'm not the mouse-brain here, because I'm *wise* enough to be

scared of them. You see, WindClan cats' leanness helps with speed, so they have the upper hand in fighting when it comes to dodging moves and retaliating quicker," she mewed matter-of-factly.

"Okay, know-it-all," Cherryspark snickered.

"Great StarClan, Acorndapple, you're just copying Beetlepelt word-to-word at this point," Strawfur said with a roll of the eyes.

"Hey, at least I actually *listened* to my mentor, unlike you frog-brains," she shot back. She looked pointedly at Strawfur, holding back a grin. "Remember when you caught *two* pieces of prey for your warrior's assessment? Hm?"

"It was just my bad luck curse stabbing my back at the worst times," Strawfur said with a dramatic sigh, shaking his head.

"Yup, *sure*."

As much as she enjoyed hanging out with her siblings, the precious time was often interrupted by her much more real problems. The nagging apprehension of tonight was already returning, and it filled her stomach with a sickening feeling of dread, clamping on like a leech. It wasn't just the turmoil of nerves buzzing with anxiety for the soon-to-come fighting, but also a deep, unexplainable feeling stabbing at her chest.

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The evening was nearing, and the clan was constantly on their paws preparing for the attack. Acorndapple worried that the amount of energy she had already spent today in the several fighting sessions was so drained to the point where she wouldn't have enough left for the *real* thing. But that thought was quickly countered as she felt another pulsing energy course through her, fueled by anxiety.

As the remainder of the day progressed, soon the sun began to gradually sink towards the horizon line, warm splashes of pale orange and pink appearing across the sky.

"I have several herb bundles prepared in case of any severe injuries," Shrikestripe was saying to Chasingfur. The two medicine

cats were seated in front of the medicine den. Acorndapple was nearby, pacing the clearing.

"Good. I collected quite a bit of horsetail while I was out in the marshes the other day, so I'm sure that it'll be useful as well," said Chasingfur.

"I saw. The stocks are overflowing. But what I'm really worried about right now is the Half-Moon meeting," Shrikestripe said suddenly. Her tail was flicking anxiously.

"Look, I'm sure StarClan will understand-"

"But Chasingfur, they could be angry about the *entire war*. StarClan has wished nothing but peace for the four clans, and we're breaking our promise to them by abandoning them to *aid* in war." Shrikestripe's voice choked up a little, and her emerald eyes were swelling with a mixture of fear and concern.

"I *understand* what you feel, Shrikestripe," Chasingfur's voice was surprisingly gentle, even though the old tom was usually quite gruff. "But what's most important is that we must not leave our clanmates when they could be killed, StarClan wouldn't condemn us for breaking the code by abandoning cats in need-"

Their voices faded away to the background as Acorndapple cast her attention to Lakestar as the powerful leader approached the pacing she-cat. She paused in the tracks of her pacing.

"Acorndapple."

"Yes?" She asked quickly, shrinking back a little as the taller she-cat loomed over her, dark blue eyes holding such a strong note of power that she was unable to hold her gaze, instead staring down at her paws.

"I want you to guard the entrance to the Training Grounds," said Lakestar.

Acorndapple quickly dipped her head. Just as she was about to hurry off in the direction of the large clearing, Lakestar halted her with a raised paw.

"One last thing. I want you to know that I will be... well, I just hope what you've told me is true."

Acorndapple rounded her eyes, looking up at her once again.

"I wouldn't lie about something so serious," she pointed out, shaking her head in disbelief.

Lakestar searched her gaze, then let out a deep, weary sigh.

"I understand. It's an entire ordeal to announce this to the whole clan, and then get all of my warriors battle-ready. It's stressful for me, you know. I just hope you are completely certain with yourself, or, you know, I will be thoroughly disappointed in you..."

Acorndapple opened her jaws, searching for words. But she was unable to say anything else as Lakestar turned and padded away.

She didn't like the ring Lakestar's words left in her head. It almost sounded like a threat, in a way. The fur along her spine prickled uncomfortably as she hurried over to the entrance of the Training Grounds.

The slight beginnings of a nighttime breeze ruffled her fur. The sun had already sunk well past the horizon, and the moon gleamed in its place, a round silver teardrop amid Silverpelt. As she studied the constellations forming in the dusky blue-black sky, she absently realized that the medicine cats would've been at the moonstone right now sharing tongues with StarClan.

A crackle of electricity shot through her as she realized *now* would be when the rival clans would begin to put their plan into action. She tensed, eyes breaking off the sky and drawing towards the dark, eerie forest, muscles taut and alert. Her head swiveled side to side, ears pricked to detect the slightest bit of motion.

The only noises that broke the almost silent surroundings were the chirp of crickets and the distant hoot of an owl. Behind her, she could also detect the slightest bit of shuffling as her clanmates shifted in their positions around camp. Everyone was on guard, ready for the attack.

But as the evening progressed to nighttime, shadows lengthening to envelop the clearing, there was still no sign of intruding warriors. Her anxiety was coursing, and her tail was twitching ever so slightly. She was terrified, truthfully. It felt as if a wave of enemy warriors would burst out of the surrounding undergrowth at any given moment. She hated how her heart would suddenly pick up speed at just the slightest rustle of leaves as the breeze brushed through the forest.

If they were sneaking through the forest right now, I would've heard them, she thought. *ThunderClan and WindClan warriors are not trained to be as stealthy as ShadowClan is. It's simply not possible.*

So, if that were the case, where *were* they?

A slight fear was beginning to worm its way through her stomach, heightening her nausea. It was something that she didn't even want to *consider*, but she was beginning to now.

What if she was all wrong?

What if she had just made an entire *fool* out of herself?

What if... Sparrowlight had *lied?*

But she wouldn't! She's always been so nice to me! She went entirely out of her way to sneak onto enemy territory to warn *me about the attack, ignoring every risk with it.*

Even then, she couldn't ignore the beginnings of doubt jabbing at the back of her mind. Why *would* Sparrowlight betray her clan to help her? They had only spoken several times at Gatherings.

It was nothing more than a mutual friendship. Sparrowlight had family and friends in ThunderClan. What reason did she have to balance a random friendship with a ShadowClan cat over her own *birth clan*?

But perhaps she just wanted to be kind. She was genuine! She was now desperately trying to fight against the thoughts. *Fine, she doesn't have a reason to protect ShadowClan, but what reasons does she have to completely* lie *to me?*

She felt the stares of her clanmates graze across her pelt. She could sense the doubt clogging the air. They were questioning her. She was sure Brookdaisy was completely convinced that she was a liar.

As disgusting as it sounded, she almost *wanted* to be attacked, to prove that her warning wasn't false.

"I will be thoroughly disappointed in you..."

Lakestar's words rang ominously in her head, and she swallowed back a wave of nausea creeping up her throat.

Time was passing, and each given moment dragged by seemingly endlessly. She was hardly aware of the vast pine forest in front of her. Instead, her senses were focused on the camp behind her, listening as her clanmates would murmur quietly to themselves, clearly wondering when the attack would begin.

She suddenly, involuntarily, lashed her tail.

She lied.

But she wouldn't! She has no reason!

She lied.

Acorndapple flattened her ears, swallowing back a lump in her throat. The actions were already dealt; her clan *had* believed her. *She* had believed. Now, although everyone was in their positions prepared to be swarmed by a wave of warriors, it was as clear as daylight that she was wrong. Her ears burned, and silently she wished to StarClan that the ground would envelop her and drag her to the warmth of the void beneath.

An hour or two dragged by, and as night drifted away, she began to grow more and more certain that she had been lied to.

"Acorndapple."

The voice was soft. With a deep, although quiet sigh, she turned around to be met by Beetlepelt. There was a note of sympathy lingering in his yellow gaze.

"Lakestar's calling it off. It's twilight. Everyone needs their strength and energy, and that is by sleeping."

Acorndapple dropped her gaze to the ground, letting out yet again another sigh.

"Alright," she whispered. Just as she began to turn and trudge off to her den, Beetlepelt stopped her with a light tap to her shoulder with his tail.

"Perhaps you overheard wrong, or they changed plans. Don't beat yourself up over it, because I know you were telling the truth, and you wanted to help the clan. *I believe you.*"

"Thank you," she said quietly. She continued in her tracks, hurrying towards the warrior's den.

She could've laughed. If she hadn't felt utterly confused, betrayed, and embarrassed, she would've. She appreciated Beetlepelt's faith in her, but it really wasn't possible for her to 'overhear' wrong, when there was *nothing to overhear in the first place*.

As she padded inside the den, she noticed the form of Lakestar lingering by the Shade Rock. Blue met sun-lit ice, and she quickly tore her gaze away before ducking through the entrance, pelt prickling.

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She was assigned dawn patrol, which she suspected was some sort of unspoken punishment. She blinked her eyes blearily, waiting in the center of the clearing for Runningheart and Cherryspark to crawl out of their nests, both of who were assigned to the dawn patrol as well. Cherryspark staggered out of the den first, looking horribly groggy, while Runningheart stumbled out a moment later, a huge yawn escaping his jaws.

"Stupid ThunderClan and WindClan, made us stay up all night and they *didn't even attack*," Cherryspark muttered grumpily as she stopped next to her.

Acorndapple didn't say anything, only swallowing, a little

nervously. *She* was the reason the entire clan had stayed up late.

Runningheart had just grumbled something incomprehensible sleepily before the three of them set off for the entrance, with Acorndapple in the lead.

The sky was rather cloudy today, with hardly a prick of the Greenleaf sun pricking through the dark gray sky at the horizon. It was difficult to tell that it was even dawn in the first place, especially now that her sleep schedule had taken a ruthless blow.

She felt herself falling asleep on her paws as she padded through the forest, and she suspected both Runningheart and Cherryspark were doing the same from their abnormal silence.

But if they stayed silent, she knew she would fall asleep. So she decided to break it.

"Nice day out, isn't it?" She said with a yawn.

"But it's literally cloudy," Cherryspark snapped grumpily, not seldom at all to her distaste in sarcasm.

"At least it's not awfully cold," said Runningheart quietly.

"Yeah, Greenleaf is *amazing*. You know, I thought Newleaf was nice, but *this*. It's way better! Leaf-bare is awful!" Cherryspark exclaimed, her sudden burst of energy a little overwhelming.

Runningheart looked a slightly bit overwhelmed as well, but Cherryspark took no notice.

"Life is truly worth living when you feel that warm Greenleaf breeze blow away the cold... and the beautiful melody of birdsong drift through the air... and everything is just so nice and sunny..."

"Great StarClan, Cherryspark, what makes you so poetic today?" Acorndapple laughed.

"There's nothing like poetry on a fine morning like this one," Cherryspark sang, her copper eyes alight. Then suddenly, her smile faded.

"But wait. It's cloudy."

They sank into silence once more, padding through the large expanse of ShadowClan territory. She was a lot more awake now, and her senses were keen as she observed the sparse undergrowth.

There seemed to be nothing out of the ordinary, which only fueled her sense of betrayal. Sparrowlight had *lied* to her. Even if the attack plan had changed, Sparrowlight hadn't even come to let her know.

A sudden smell wafted through her nostrils. She came to a sudden stop, with the rest of the patrol doing the same. Her body seemed to freeze in place, and a strange feeling began to form in her stomach.

When she killed a piece of prey, the smell was... *familiar*. It didn't smell wrong, it was simply normal. The scent of death that lingered was nothing out of the ordinary, and often, she didn't even notice it.

This was different. It sent a freezing-cold, turbulent jolt through her entire body, numbing her veins as if her paw pads had touched the ice of a frozen pond.

Her instincts screamed to turn around and run. *Avoid* what was the cause of this scent. But she couldn't because, despite the fear beginning to chill her body, a sickly sense of curiosity wormed through her stomach.

With a slight tremor in her step, she began to follow the scent. The patrol followed without question, a deathly silence choking the air.

As they padded through the sparse undergrowth, jaws open to pinpoint the direction, she spotted the distinct gleam of red dotted on some grass. The three of them stopped, glancing down at the grass. The fur on her back raised in horror.

"Perhaps someone was hunting here," said Runningheart. He sounded completely unconvinced by his own words, and his sage eyes were enlarged.

Acorndapple caught the very slight glint of color from the corner of her eyes. She turned, stomach dropping, to see several more small

splashes of blood coating the ground and bushes, leading in the direction of the source of the smell.

"*There's more*," Acorndapple said shakily.

"Oh, StarClan," Runningheart whispered and began to follow the trail.

They quickened their stride. Only until they reached it.

She could scarcely hear the scream that had ripped through Cherryspark's jaws.

Delirium. The feeling was unusual. It was what she could describe as a deep, numbing shock, to see someone you had once cared about now lying on the ground lifelessly, jaws gaped open with a current of scarlet trickling from his maw. His pelt was almost unrecognizable, matted with drying blood as if his fur were littered with the petals of poppy flowers. The image itself was seared in her mind forever: his body lying on the ground, dull yellow eyes wide open in silent terror. Countless wounds marred his body as if he were *shredded* apart. The ground around him was a mess of bloodied flesh, chunks of his insides ripped apart and left scattered around him.

But what stood out most prominently to her was the singular yellow hyacinth, which lay on top of the pools of scarlet gathering across the dirt. It was torn apart, its once blooming yellow petals now splashed and stained with a red-brown color. But despite the rotting stench of death that once weighed down the air and clogged her nose, the only smell that now filled her nostrils was the rich, intoxicating smell of the hyacinth.

Runningheart had fallen to the ground, his sage eyes as dull and lifeless as the scene in front of them, almost frozen as if in a trance. It was only a matter of seconds before she was vomiting, her entire body shivering violently as the image wrapped in her head so thickly it was as if her brain was tangled in cobwebs. She couldn't break free, and even while closing her eyes the picture of his dead body appeared in her mind.

Chapter Twenty-One

Beetlepelt had once said that ShadowClan wasn't home without the great pine trees that sheltered the clan. He saw them as a symbol of both life and wisdom, holding the history of the clan's growth in its old bark, and offering seasons of stories to come. The variety of pine trees represented the different marks in ShadowClan's history, showing change within the growing clan.

But it didn't feel much like home anymore, especially now that her former mentor had been brutally murdered in the once safe and comforting forest.

Of course, the clan was quick to come to a conclusion. Clearly, it couldn't be any more obvious: ThunderClan. The clan they were at war with? The clan they had, several moons ago, struck a blow to their camp? His death was probably a warning; a brutal one perhaps.

Acorndapple thought otherwise.

It shouldn't have to be any more obvious than it already was. How coincidental could it be that the *one* cat now bore a jagged scar across its face, which it had seemingly gained overnight? And that *one* cat happened to have joined the clan only about one or two moons ago?

She had claimed she had been scratched across the face by a protruding branch, but then why was it that Beetlepelt's claws were bloodied? Needless to say, he had put up a fight in his final moments.

It just couldn't be any more obvious.

The murderer? Shell.

She was running. Endlessly. Dark pines blurred together at the corners of her vision. The path ahead was blanketed by a thick haze of fog, offering no clear view of what lay ahead of her. But despite this fact, her paws seemed to carry her in the right direction. The trail itself felt familiar as if she had traveled it many times over for countless moons.

Her heart was palpitating rapidly in her chest, racing faster than even her legs could run. It felt almost as if she was struggling under the surface of a frozen river, fighting to escape the dark and blurry depths. But her mind was intent on one thing, and although she was unsure of what it was, her paws seemed to carry her towards it.

But she knew immediately, as she burst through the cedar grove into the clearing, what she had been searching for.

And she was too late.

He was already dead. His mauled body was surrounded by countless yellow hyacinths, stretching out as far as her vision could render.

A wail burst from her throat, escaping her jaws. She sank to the ground, letting her claws dig into the scarlet-stained ground. A searing wave of guilt surged over her in a wave, taking her breath away with it. It was her fault this time. She could've saved him, yet she was too late...

"*Wake up*."

Burning, ghostly yellow eyes were glinting down at her.

Her eyes snapped open.

Yellow eyes were now replaced by dark blue ones. They were held by the concerned face of Strawfur, expression creased with sympathy.

"You were thrashing in your sleep. Nightmare?" He whispered.

She blinked for a moment, still processing as the fading tendrils of the dream gradually slipped away. Now fully awake, she nodded silently.

Strawfur touched his nose to her ear reassuringly.

"If you ever need someone to talk to, I'm here," he said, before padding back to his nest, pelt fading into the long shadows of the den.

She shut her eyes again, resting her head on her paws. She was aware she would not be able to sleep again, and she especially did not want to in the fear of experiencing another nightmare, which she had been plagued by for the past quarter moon. So instead she thought, allowing her mind to spread out.

She was thinking about Beetlepelt's death again, and she couldn't help it. It was as if his spirit haunted her, constantly reminding her that he was gone. But his death *meant* something. Whatever it was, she couldn't deny a feeling, like embers falling on a patch of grass, preparing to burst into a disaster of flames. For just a moment, an image appeared faintly in her mind: a vast and dark elm forest, shrouded by mist. It vanished only a second later, allowing the unmistakable feeling to grow without hindrance.

Rage.

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Clan life was simply a routine. Wake up, patrol, eat, and then head back to her nest and sleep. She was avoiding everyone, and it was for the better. It allowed her thoughts to roam, letting her anger grow.

She ignored *everyone*, even her siblings. This was selfless of her. The raging emotions that affected her mind would not have to be inflicted on anyone else. She had learned from the very start to never talk about her emotions with anyone else, and she would keep it that way. It would only spread negativity.

She was crouching at the fresh-kill pile, nibbling on a vole. Eating it felt like attempting to swallow thistles. She really could not muster the appetite, and she had forgotten the last time she had genuinely felt hungry. Eating was a chore. Just like everything else.

Her mind was constantly infected by nightmares. She couldn't remember the last time she had slept peacefully. No matter how much she tried to stop it, she couldn't get rid of the image of his dead body lying on the ground. There was something that disturbed her so deeply about it. His death meant something.

A reddish-brown pelt flickered at the edge of her vision. Her head snapped up, wide and insomniac eyes meeting a pair of yellow ones. Her gaze then flicked up to the large scar that cut across her cheek and rose all the way up to the top of her head. It was still a hue of red, gradually fading to a purple-pink. The scar was clearly recent.

What are *you?* Her mind whispered as she glared at the she-cat. Shell looked concerned for a moment, eyes rounded with sympathy, then quickly glanced away.

I don't need your sympathy. You joined ShadowClan simply to ruin my life. Why did I ever trust you?

You were a rogue all along.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Everyone was concerned about her, and she *hated* the sympathy. She wasn't wallowing in grief like Runningheart, so what reason did everyone have to stare at her with round eyes and tilted heads? She was *thinking*. She was helping her clan, and everyone should appreciate that.

She had completely lost track of time until she had overheard someone mentioning that tonight was the full moon. Irritation pulsed through her veins. This would mean the clan would start throwing accusations around at the other clans for killing him when it was more than clear who the killer was. *Shell*.

"Acorndapple, Lakestar would like to speak with you in her den."

Goldpelt's voice snapped her out of her thoughts. The deputy was watching her from several tail-lengths away, clearly trying to keep a distance.

She grunted something incomprehensible under her breath before padding towards the entrance of Lakestar's den beneath the Shade Rock. She didn't bother to announce her presence and slipped inside, brushing past the moss lining the walls.

Lakestar was lying in her nest but met her gaze as she entered. Acorndapple didn't avoid the piercing blue eyes and instead held them confidently. *I'm helping the clan, and she should be grateful for that.*

"Sit down," the leader ordered, her voice as sharp as flint. She did so, continuing to hold her stare.

Lakestar let out a deep sigh.

"Acorndapple, I'll get straight to the point. You've been acting like a fox-heart for the past two quarter moons. The clan is uncomfortable with you. But fine, make yourself miserable, see how I care."

She curled her lip.

"I'm doing nothing but *helping* the clan. Perhaps you should see past your goody-whiskers and take a close look because your near-sightedness won't get you anywhere," Acorndapple spat, lashing her tail.

Lakestar rose to her paws, taking a step forward, eyes glaring daggers into her soul.

"I'm taking a close look right now," she snarled. "And I'm starting to have second thoughts on allowing you to go to the Gathering tonight."

Acorndapple fell silent but continued to hold her gaze.

Lakestar sat back down again, smoothing her pelt. Her expression still offered fury, however, despite the more calm posture.

"I'll be kind and allow you to go. Perhaps it'll do you some good to get some fresh air and meet other cats, and realize life isn't about tucking yourself away in dark corners and blaming the entire world for being so cruel."

You know nothing.

All she could manage was a slight nod through narrowed eyes before stalking out of the den, tail flicking to and fro.

As soon as she entered the clearing, she spotted the reddish-brown pelt of Shell lingering by the warrior's den. She clenched her fangs and felt the beginning of a snarl rumble in her chest.

Only a second later she found her paws carrying her in Shell's direction.

Shell glanced up as she approached. The usual, sickening expression of sympathy appeared in her gaze, but it began to fade as soon as she noticed the look on Acorndapple's face. Her yellow eyes began to gradually dissipate into an unfamiliar look. It was cold, almost distant in a way.

"Come with me," she muttered between clenched fangs, her claws digging into the ground.

"Alright." Shell didn't look surprised in any way as they padded out of camp, slipping through the entrance.

Her thoughts had been swarming for far too long. She couldn't bear the rapidly expanding feelings growing inside of her. She was on the verge of breaking, and with certainty, she knew, this would not end well.

ShadowClan territory was *huge*. There were plenty of places to confront her. But she immediately decided on the first place that came to mind.

The clearing.

Where everything happened.

The place haunted her. Every time she patrolled, she avoided it. But now that all of her harsh, bitter feelings were rising, she wanted it to happen in the most negative place she could think of, so every detrimental memory would be held in that one spot, and it simply wouldn't have to be spread anywhere else. After this, she would avoid it at all costs, unless something terrible happened again.

Acorndapple spotted Shell's muscles growing taut beneath her pelt as they brushed through the undergrowth. She could almost *hear* her teeth grinding in her mouth as she realized where they were. This clearing held power over both of them.

"Why are we here?" Shell muttered, breaking the potent silence.

"You know," she choked out, freezing in her tracks and swinging her gaze over in Shell's direction. Her gaze was round and unfocused.

"Acorndapple," said Shell gently. "You and I *both* know that he had to die."

"No he didn't," she snarled. "You're just here to ruin my life. Why did you have to join the clan? Why couldn't you have joined ThunderClan or something and ruined another cat's life?"

"Because I've been watching you for my entire life." Shell's eyes now held a disturbing new light, and she found herself shrinking beneath her pelt.

She continued to glare at Shell.

"All I've ever wanted to do is *be* you, Acorndapple," she went on. "All your life you have cats around you that *cared* about you, and you never took it for granted. It's such a precious, *secure* little life, but also one that could be destroyed with just the slightest nick with a claw."

Shell's voice had grown hoarse, and her eyes gazed off unnervingly.

"You don't understand how much I *wanted* that, Acorndapple. Of course, you may be wondering: *why?* Well you see, I have my own little sob story. I'm sure you still remember that pretty little story I told you about my past life and all. Guess what? It was a *lie*. I had to seem friendly and relatable, of course. But the truth is, I was cast aside by my parents who had always wanted a son. I was a *disappointment* because, according to them, I wouldn't be able to fulfill the leadership role in my group when my father died because I was a *she-cat*. I was the only kit they had, and they were unable to have more.

"So I killed them. I left."

Shell's voice rasped in her throat.

"But I found ShadowClan. It was such a perfect little community. Then, my eyes fell upon *you*... and I just knew that I *wanted* to be you. I don't know whether it's hatred or love. But you were so perfect... so *pure*. I decided to join. I wanted to be your *friend*, to have close relations with such a *great* cat. But guess what? *You didn't trust me.*"

Shell's voice broke into something between a laugh and a snarl.

"But then you *did* trust me! You became my *friend!* Oh, but you didn't care about me *that* much because you had so much important stuff to do, because obviously such a *great* cat *constantly* has

everyone right at her heels!

"I was so, *so* horribly envious. Your stupid siblings were always in the way. But then *him*. There was something about him that influenced you, not just as a mentor, but as something *more*. He stood directly in my path. He didn't trust me. He had to *die*."

"You didn't," Acorndapple growled, her voice faint. Why was she so surprised? She already knew. It had been more than just clear that Shell had murdered him.

Her voice was lost for a moment. She felt as if she was spiraling into a deep void, careening off an edge into an abyss, struggling to breathe in the dark water. It was all too much.

"You're a murderer," she finally choked out. "And I'll tell Lakestar. I'll have the whole clan know. You'll be *exiled*!"

Shell's eyes rounded- but not in fear. But in a sickening look of *sympathy*.

"Oh, Acorndapple," she sighed, her voice pitifully gentle. "They won't believe you. You see, I've been slowly feeding them lies about you, turning them against you. The first cat? Brookdaisy. Slowly but surely gossip will spread about you."

Acorndapple froze, eyes gazing out unfocused.

"You've made it just *too* easy to do this! Now the clan certainly thinks you're a *rogue*, because you've been avoiding *everyone* and acting like a fox-heart. You even lied about a war! They think you're a terrible cat, Acorndapple, and that's just the truth."

She clenched her fangs, claws sliding into the dirt. The fury that had once fired her veins had dulled and became nothing more than a gaping hollow of despair, like a large wound in her chest. Her first instinct was to turn around and race back to camp, tell *everyone* that Shell was a liar and a murderer. But she kept her paws rooted to the ground as she now realized something.

They wouldn't believe her.

Chapter Twenty-Three

The very last thing she wanted to do was go to the Gathering. She was *dreading* it. She would much rather curl up in her nest, wrap her tail over her nose, and forget everything. But she couldn't, and clearly StarClan was pushing for her to suffer today.

Throughout the rest of the evening, Shell's words haunted her, the raw voice of the she-cat constantly nagging the back of her mind.

Liar. Murderer. Liar.

Her claws slid into the ground, her tail flicking.

She's a liar. She's a murderer.

She wants to destroy me.

Her insomniac gaze swept furtively over her clanmates. It was like any other day. cats were chatting incessantly with each other, enjoying the fading warmth of the sun's rays as it slipped below the horizon.

She glanced at Shell, who was talking eagerly with Brookdaisy. Her lip curled in a subtle snarl, eyes narrowing as she felt her veins begin to burn as if a scorching magma was spreading through her body.

Telling more lies about me, I'm sure.

But despite the sparks of anger, her gut felt heavy, almost as if a deep sadness was weighing her down.

I have a cat actively destroying my life right now, and there's nothing I can do about it.

That felt like a good excuse to feel sad.

"We'll head out now." Lakestar's sharp voice cut through her thoughts.

Her tail twitched as her mind repeated her complaints of *not* wanting to go to the Gathering once again.

The named cats began to follow Lakestar to the entrance, as well as Acorndapple. This included Goldennewt, Hazyfall, Pigeonsilk, Fernfur, Strawfur, Honeypelt, the medicine cats, and Runningheart. She suspected Lakestar had the same intentions about bringing Runningheart to the Gathering, as the tom still moped around grieving.

'Life isn't about tucking yourself away in dark corners and blaming the entire world for being so cruel.'

Feeling a flicker of anger as her mind decided to repeat Lakestar's words from that morning, she pushed her thoughts away and decided to fall into step with him. He was the only cat that she was convinced hadn't fallen victim to Shell's lies, as the grieving tom spent most of his time tucked away in his nest to be speaking with anyone.

Silently, the two of them offered comfort to each other's presence. No words were exchanged, only a quiet understanding. Although, it wasn't like they could talk to each other anyway when the clan was forbidden to speak on the journey to fourtrees.

Just for this little moment, as they neared the Thunderpath, her mind felt at peace. It was oddly comforting to have another cat experiencing similar feelings. It was as if a weight was taken off her shoulders, instead floating like a cloud above them.

Still, Runningheart knew *nothing* about how Beetlepelt really died. He wasn't being tormented by a cat who was intent on destroying a life.

She breathed a small sigh, ducking as she brushed through the undergrowth sheltering the entrance of the tunnel. As they entered the pure darkness of the narrow tunnel, her eyes adjusted, correcting her vision to see perfectly in the almost pitch-blackness.

She was about to exit the other end of the tunnel when a sudden caterwaul shook the air, piercing her ears. Her mind hardly had a second to register as a wave of warriors crashed into them, their bodies blocking the exit of the tunnel and causing her vision to be swamped by total darkness.

Only a moment later the musky scent of ThunderClan filled her nostrils, along with the peat scent of WindClan. She practically choked on the air of the overwhelming smells drowning her senses. Acorndapple froze for a second, disturbed by the snarls ringing through the air and the flash of claws and fangs dancing in her vision.

How dare they! Now *they attack us?!*

Her hesitation was proved to be a fatal mistake as the sudden powerful force of a body crashed into her, sending her reeling backward.

She shrieked as claws scored down her flank, causing blood to spurt out of a freshly opened wound. The pain sent a jolt of anger through her nerves, causing her to swing back her paw and thump her opponent on the back of her head. The she-cat let out a yelp, staggering backward, momentarily winded.

She lunged forward again and knocked her opponent's legs out from under her, causing her to fall to the ground with a *thud*. But the she-cat was nimble and twisted under her, latching her claws onto Acorndapple's shoulders and digging them in. *Hard*.

She snarled, bucking and twisting as a burning fire raged through the fresh wounds. But the she-cat held on fast and used her as a support to lift herself off the ground.

In a clumsy attempt to become free Acorndapple swung her back leg towards her belly, but the she-cat leaped over her and shoved her to the ground, the two of them becoming a snarling mess of blood and anger. She kicked at her exposed belly and latched her teeth on her shoulder, the metallic tang of blood washing over her tongue. The cat yowled in pain, grasping her ear in her jaw, clamping down without hesitation. She could feel something tear in

the process, a hot fiery pulse racing down her nerves. Thanks to the many blood vessels in her ear, a flood of scarlet ran down her face, obscuring her eyes. Her vision was now filtered by a sheet of red.

I can't see, she wanted to cry. Her head was throbbing and her senses were spiraling out of control. She was slowly losing control altogether, but she held on desperately to the remaining fragments of any sense of power that could possibly be left in her battered body, worn both physically and mentally.

Just her luck, four limbs materialized out of the air above them, tripping over the tussling she-cats. She bared her fangs as a musty smell flooded her nostrils.

Great. Another opponent.

The she-cat she was still grappling with had loosened her grip, distracted by the other cat's clumsiness. Acorndapple stole the chance to send a sprawling kick at her stomach, causing her to gasp in pain, temporarily stunned. Acorndapple struggled to her paws, turning to face the new cat. She could barely make out a thin cat with light brown fur and eyes as sharp as flint, glinting faintly in the darkness.

WindClan.

His eyes suddenly flickered up a little, but then he quickly focused on her again. Some gut instinct told her to move, and she did, hearing the hot and ragged breathing ruffling her pelt.

The she-cat came sailing past her, barely missing her by a whisker before crashing into the tom, their heads colliding in a painful fashion as they fell to the ground, both hissing with pain and irritation.

She curled her lip, feeling a warm flash of satisfaction run through her. Although some hidden voice told her this was wrong, it still gratified her to see other cats suffer the same pain she had.

Brown tabby fur pricked at the corner of her eye. She turned.

Amidst the throng of fighting felines, a gap seemed to open in the

center to reveal the body of a tabby she-cat. Her pelt was stained with blood, and her doe eyes were alight with the hunger for battle. Time seemed to freeze as feelings began to expand in her chest, practically choking her.

Before she knew it, she was gliding across the ground towards her, unsheathed claws becoming soaked and stained from the puddles of scarlet.

Time unfreezed as Sparrowlight's expression turned to horror as she flung herself at the she-cat, her body crashing down onto her *hard*. She didn't even have time to register as Acorndapple began to slash her claws down her sides, leaving gaping rivers of wounds running through her pelt.

Then, Sparrowlight seemed to wake up. A hair-raising screech ripped through her jaws, heavy with pain as Acorndapple's claws created deep gashes in her skin.

Sparrowlight began to thrash under her, kicking and spitting. Acorndapple's grip loosened as Sparrowlight now had the upper hand, trapping her beneath her brown paws and striking a blow to her face. It missed her eyes by a startling *whisker* as she moved her head slightly, instead landing on her cheek. Blood spurted through the air, causing Acorndapple to release a hiss of agony.

"*Liar*," she snarled in a hoarse voice, blood dripping down her face and into her mouth. Sparrowlight continued to hold her with claws close to her throat. "You *lied* to me."

A sudden grin crossed Sparrowlight's pain-stricken features. It was so, so horribly bright.

"I did."

She saw the blow coming. With every drop of desperation left in her body, she powered herself upwards, the claws that had been meant for her throat now attaching to her tail.

She didn't think she had ever felt anything so painful in her life.

It was as if her tail was being sliced apart. Her claws reached

through her skin, floundering into deep, tender bits of flesh. A horrendous yowl broke from her throat, and she whipped her tail away, earning another wound in the process. Every nerve was on her fire. Scarlet was pooling rapidly across the ground, and the pain was so agonizing that she bit down on her tongue.

The pain and the emotions were building and expanding rapidly. Her head began to spin and her claws sank into the bloodied dirt.

It was at that moment, everything snapped.

She wasn't in control anymore.

Every drop of pain diminished and was replaced by a burning fiery rushing through her bones.

Rage.

Acorndapple whipped around and barreled into her, snapping her fangs into her pelt. Her vision grew stained with red as teeth tore flesh and claws sank into skin.

Sparrowlight was growing weaker beneath her, yet still managed to wrap her paws around her neck and kick with her hind legs into Acorndapple's stomach. This only caused her to become more furious, and she clamped down on her ear and *tore*.

"*Let me go*," Sparrowlight choked, her voice wavering faintly as she begged for mercy.

"I'm going to kill you," Acorndapple snarled.

She could hardly decipher any other thought that screamed in protest, blocked by a heavy fog. Her mind was intent on one thing.

And that was to kill her.

She began to sink her claws into Sparrowlight's throat.

"*Acorndapple!*"

She froze, her grip loosening. Sparrowlight stole the chance to

crawl free, her flanks heaving and pelt barely recognizable as it was coated with a dark scarlet.

Her lip curled in a snarl as she turned to face the source of her distraction. It was Copperleap. Blood was seeping from a gaping wound on his cheek, but despite the painful wound, his hazel eyes were focused on her, enlarged with horror.

"You were going to kill her." His voice sounded numb with shock.

"I was, and you distracted me," she spat. "Because that's all you do! Both of you are *liars*."

"Believe me when I say this, I wasn't behind Sparrowlight's plan at all," he said, his eyes imploring. "I didn't agree with it. I promise."

She lashed her tail, drawing a step closer while unsheathing her claws. *Why should I believe what anyone says anymore?*

"*Retreat!*"

She halted, flattening her ears. The fighting around them seemed to cease, except for Lakestar and Blazestar.

"*No!*" Lakestar's snarl rang hoarsely in the air. The pale she-cat's eyes were a startling, feverish type of bright. She was fighting throat-to-throat with Blazestar, her pelt matted with blood.

"We're outnumbered by a *lot!*" Goldpelt hissed in a wavering voice, although his eyes were fierce. "Come on!"

"Send someone to bring reinforcements!" Lakestar choked out, swinging a clumsy blow towards Blazestar's face, which missed by a whisker. "Then we can win!"

"Are you insane?" Goldpelt yowled. "We only have one or two more warriors back at camp! That's not going to help anything!"

Lakestar didn't have a chance to argue as Blazestar's claws ripped into her throat. There was a gurgling noise as her jaws parted in a silent yowl before she collapsed to the ground, her eyes rolling back into her head.

Author's note (from the future) - I published this chapter a while back, but I just realized I posted it on Acorndapple's creation day!! Yayy happy (belated) 1 year bday to her :)

For future reference, so I can actually remember, it's on March 16th!

Chapter Twenty-Four

For the first time in a long time, her sleep was not plagued by nightmares. A deep abyss of black wrapped her slumber in a warm embrace, allowing her to drift off peacefully into the void. A small part of her conscious mind wished for this sleep to last forever.

It ended all too soon as she felt teeth fasten on the nape of her neck, dragging her from her nest.

Acorndapple's eyes snapped open, panic driving her body. She wrenched herself free, twisting, and lashed an uncoordinated blow at her attacker.

Cherryspark dodged her unsheathed claws and glared at her with blazing copper eyes.

"Get *up*," she snarled.

Acorndapple froze for a second, bewildered by the expression marring her sister's face. She stared blankly at her, jaws agape.

"*Stand up*," Cherryspark snarled again.

Now a flash of anger struck her down, mingled with shock.

"What did I even *do*?" Acorndapple finally said, her voice wavering with confusion and higher pitched with anger.

Cherryspark's eyes flamed.

"So now you're questioning what you did? Look, Acorn, but this is hard to believe anymore. You've shut *everyone* away. You hardly take care of yourself anymore, look at how skinny you are!" The beginning of a snarl wavered in her voice. "Look, I know you're

upset about his death, but this is unnecessary. You need to stop, and if you don't, I'm going to *make* you."

"I'm *helping* the clan!" Acorndappe choked out, her throat burning with frustration. "But everything is just going *wrong!*"

"*Helping?*" Cherryspark sneered out through clenched fangs. "The only thing you're helping is keeping your nest warm! Look, come on. Stand up, get fresh air, and I'll find you something better to do than moping around all day."

Acorndapple lashed her tail furiously.

"Oh so now you're *finally* trying to be *logical* for once in your life?" She spat.

"So you admit I'm being logical?" Cherryspark's lip curled. "Yeah. Get up."

This time, Cherryspark rushed forward and sank her teeth into her scruff, dragging her upwards to stand on her paws. Acorndapple hissed and shook her free.

"I can stand up on my own accord," she snarled, the back of her neck throbbing.

"Then do it instead of sitting there!" Cherryspark snapped, exasperated.

Acorndapple rose to her paws, continuing to lock a glare into Cherryspark's gaze, which she met unflinchingly.

"So?" She demanded.

"Come on," Cherryspark ordered sharply, marching for the entrance.

She followed grudgingly, ears flattened across her head.

The clearing was surprisingly sunny, with sunlight pouring down without waver. Its burning strength caused her eyes to water, and she blinked against the sting. After a moment of blinking, she caught sight of the camp. Only a few cats dotted the surroundings,

some being Lakestar and Goldpelt, who sat in the center of the clearing, talking in a serious manner.

Cherryspark froze in her tracks before turning to her, eyes a bit brighter than usual. She couldn't tell if it was from the sun or if it was her genuine expression.

"You know mediators? They can be a great help!" Cherryspark exclaimed, a grin suddenly crossing her features. "I know their job is mostly for solving arguments, but it sounds like you have a pretty big conflict going on. So let's go find one, and preferably not Hazyfall..." She trailed off, gazing around the camp.

"*Cherryspark*," Acorndapple muttered through clenched fangs, feeling her ears heat up with anger. "You're acting ridiculous. I *don't* need a mediator."

"I can't be acting any more ridiculous than you are right now," her sister said with a snort. "Now, let's see... oh, there's one!"

She was practically dragged by the ear as Cherryspark made her way over to a brown and white tom settled comfortably in the shade. He glowered as they approached, his emerald eyes narrowing.

"*Cherryspark*," Acorndapple hissed through gritted teeth, blood rushing in her ears.

Her sister ignored her.

"What?" Brownsnout huffed, looking unimpressed as the two sisters approached him.

"Acorndapple, tell him all your problems," Cherryspark ordered, giving her a nudge forward.

She turned on her, hissing.

"*Excuse me?!*"

She turned back to face him, ears flattened across her head. He simply gazed at her, piercing green eyes cold and terribly bored.

"Well?"

"She's acting like a mouse-brain and avoiding everyone! All she's ever doing is moping around in her nest all day and being fox-heart! I'm done with this and I'm sure the rest of the clan can agree with me," Cherryspark burst out before Acorndapple could begin to protest that there was absolutely *no* problem whatsoever.

She stiffened. If Brownsnout had not been there, she would've given Cherryspark a good cuffing on the ears. Instead, she forced herself to remain composed, although her nostrils still flared with a mixture of anger and embarrassment.

"Hm, I see," he hummed. "Well, I'm no medicine cat, but it almost sounds like something called... '*grieving*'."

Cherryspark narrowed her eyes and thumped her tail on the ground.

"Are you being sarcastic?" She hissed.

Acorndapple couldn't help but turn to Cherryspark and widen her eyes in mock surprise.

"You know what sarcasm is?" Acorndapple said with a fake gasp. "StarClan, I never thought the day would come!"

"Clearly she doesn't understand it at all," said Brownsnout quietly with a snort. She thought she could discern the slightest hint of amusement on his face.

If the emotion ever existed, it faded away as quickly as the ripple of a raindrop on a pool of water.

"Are you through? I was just in the middle of cleaning my pelt," he grumbled.

"Fine, we're going," Cherryspark snapped, turning on her heel and stalking away, just before indicating to Acorndapple to follow with a flick of the tail.

She trailed after with a huff, her tail tip flicking irritably.

"Well that was annoying," Cherryspark huffed as soon as they left his earshot, beginning to hyperventilate. "Who does he think he is? He's a mediator, for StarClan's sake, can he not be helpful?!"

"He was probably annoyed with you wasting time and creating problems *when there were none in the first place*," Acorndapple hissed, locking her furious gaze with Cherryspark's copper stare.

"Hey, are you guys arguing?"

Strawfur's concerned voice broke the ruffled atmosphere as the smoky golden tom hurried over to them from the warrior's den, his eyes rounded.

"Cherryspark's just acting like an overly concerned mother goose, that's all," she muttered sharply, throwing a pointed look at her sister.

"'*Mother Goose*'? At least I'm not acting like a fox-heart!" She snapped, lashing her tail.

"Okay, great StarClan, calm down. I don't know what's bothering you two so much but clearly, we need a change of subject here," Strawfur said, sitting down. "Ooh, the other day, I was talking with Chaffinchflare. He was telling me this super awesome story about ShadowClan's past! Wanna hear it?"

"I'd rather hear it from Chaffinchflare. You're a terrible storyteller," Cherryspark sniffed. There was still a bit of annoyance lingering in her eyes from the argument seconds ago, but she could detect the beginning of a playful tone jabbing at her voice.

He gaped at Cherryspark.

"What! My storytelling is amazing. You're just jealous because even if *you* tried to tell a story you wouldn't even be able to remember what happened because of how horrible your memory is," Strawfur huffed.

The two of them playfully bickered with each other as they padded towards the elder's den. Acorndapple even found herself joining in occasionally. She had forgotten the warm feeling bubbling in her

chest that she experienced when being with her littermates, spending so long letting her fury-driven thoughts consume her.

Perhaps Cherryspark was right.

Perhaps it was better to spend time with her siblings rather than stay tucked away in her nest all day.

Chaffinchflare was lounging in front of the elder's den, the sun perfectly positioned so its rays could stream out at the entrance, a particular warm beam encroaching the spot Chaffinchflare was settled. But he enjoyed it, his eyes closed as he relaxed in the warmth.

At the sound of their voices, his eyelids fluttered open.

"Hi Chaffinchflare," Strawfur said warmly as the trio approached, blinking happily at his former mentor.

The old tom purred in response, greeting the other two siblings as well.

"I was hoping you could tell us that story you told me the other day. It was pretty cool," said Strawfur eagerly.

"Hm, if you insist," Chaffinchflare rumbled, pausing for a moment to let out a huge yawn. While he did so, the three of them settled around in front of him.

"Now, I'd like you three, or *two*-" he met her and Cherryspark's gazes as they hadn't heard the story yet "-to know that this is a pretty touchy topic within the clan. Especially with your family, because one of the cats I'll be talking about is related to you three."

Acorndapple tilted her head, while Cherryspark opened her jaws, clearly eager to say something but quickly shut it at Chaffinchflare's warning look.

"*Many* moons ago, around the time I was an apprentice, we had a medicine cat by the name of Russettalon."

Russettalon. Russettalon. She ran the name in her mind, but still

could not feel any prick of familiar towards the cat. She had never heard of the name before, especially not mentioned by her family.

"Russettalon was a diligent medicine cat, by what my memory tells me. Hard-working. Got things done. He was even close friends with the former leader, Goldstar. *Not* to be confused with Goldpelt, mind you. The reason they share the same name is a long story, so I won't burden you with that for now.

"Anyways, the entire clan perceived him as a loyal medicine cat. He shared his visions with StarClan to the rest of the clan and made very sure that everyone was strong and healthy. Now, clearly, this story isn't about how great Russettalon was, is it? Being hard-working wasn't his only trait. He was also a bit manipulative. He would *constantly* twist other cat's words around to get his way. Some cats have made theories that this behavior started all the way back to when he was a kit, but only a few cats know about his past. One is Goldstar's son, I believe.

"He and Goldstar were great friends, right? Well, Russettalon was jealous of him. Not just for the role of leadership, but for everything he *had*. He was horribly envious. So he made a vow to Goldstar that he would destroy him. Take away everything he had so he could feel better about the lonely and miserable life he had.

"Of course, as any sensible leader would do, he threatened to exile him. But Russettalon was so well-respected by his clanmates that the clan would obviously not believe Goldstar. So he kept the fact that Russettalon was insane to himself."

"So what did Russettalon do?" Cherryspark blurted out, her eyes round as she focused intently on Chaffinchflare.

"I'm getting to that," he said, a little gruffly, before continuing his story: "As time went on, cats began to mysteriously die. Secretly, he fed them poisonous herbs. The cats that died were Goldpelt's closest kin, even his mate and some of his kits-"

The tom was cut off as Strawfur let out a loud gasp, his eyes enlarged.

"You already heard the story, mouse-brain, why are you acting so shocked?" Cherryspark snapped at him.

"Sorry," he muttered, while his former mentor gave him a piercing stare before moving on.

"He was suffering *immense* guilt. On the other paw, Russettalon was growing insane. I mean, if you've murdered multiple cats you'd start to go crazy too, right? You've basically destroyed your life at that point. So that's what happened to Russettalon. He destroyed his own life while he was so intent on destroying Goldstar's. Finally, Goldstar was driven to insanity. He murdered Russettalon."

"So how does the rest of the clan know that Russettalon was evil if Goldstar decided not to tell anyone?" Acorndapple asked as soon as Chaffinchflare paused to take a breath, her brows furrowed.

"Remember, he was driven to insanity. Goldstar was absolutely not in the right mind when he ran back to camp right after killing Russettalon, stood on Shade Rock, and confessed to *everyone* why so many cats had died. The clan was shocked, but they believed him at least because it explained the cause of so many mysterious deaths."

"Did clan life continue normally after that?" Cherryspark questioned, head tilted.

"ShadowClan didn't move on so easily at first," Chaffinchflare sighed. "Frankly, many cats were betrayed by Goldstar staying quiet, especially because loved ones had died and he could've prevented that."

"Wait. Hold on. You said at the beginning he was related to us?" Acorndapple mewed, a gaping pit forming in her stomach. *I don't want to be related to a vile cat like him!*

"Russettalon is not related to you. Goldstar is," said Chaffinchflare, blinking at her reassuringly.

"Alright." She wasn't sure if she was completely relieved. Goldstar had made mistakes as well.

"Sadly, that's all I know about the story. There are some other

important details, things *I* don't even know about. The story goes way deeper than you may think."

She was about to open her jaws to say something else when a loud yowling entered her ears. She jerkily twisted her head around, fur spiking.

Strawfur and Cherryspark spun around as well, their pelts bushing out.

In the center of the clearing, Lakestar and Goldpelt were standing face-to-face, their expressions marred with fury. Their muzzles were twisted in snarls, and their pelts were fluffed out to twice their size. It looked as if they were moments away from launching themselves at each other.

The entire clan had paused, voices growing silent, and turned to face the scene before them with pricked ears and rounded eyes.

"Day by day you grow more insane!" Goldpelt yowled, sending a jolt of shock through her body. She had never seen the normally calm warrior so furious.

"What do you possibly think you're doing, planning on sending our warriors back to battle, after suffering so many severe injuries?! Even the *medicine cats* are injured, for StarClan's sake! *You're* still injured! You lost a *life*!"

Lakestar shoved her face closer so that her muzzle was an inch away from his, her blue eyes flaming.

"Your job, as a deputy, is to organize patrols, *not* to concern yourself with the plans *I* make," she spat.

"So now you're changing the purpose of a deputy?" His eyes were narrowed to slits. "My job, as a deputy, is to *advise* you. And I'll tell you this, your plan is *horrible*. Everyone is still injured! If you don't believe me, *take a look yourself*."

At the mention of injuries, Acorndapple glanced down at her tail. Thick layers of poultices were draped over it, and she was reminded of the throb of pain.

Sparrowlight's doing, she thought, curling her lip.

Lakestar's eyes flashed. She opened her jaws as if to say something, before snapping them shut. A second later, she turned on her heel and stormed back to her den, her tail whipping to and fro furiously.

Goldpelt watched her leave, his jaw clenched and his expression grim.

author's note:

AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAA I'M GETTING WRITER'S BLOCK AHDJAJDAKLJDSSALKJSDA

[image]

Chapter Twenty-Five

The days had spun by quickly, although they weren't exactly empty of events. It was almost a common occurrence for Lakestar and Goldpelt to argue. She couldn't even recall the last time the two of them had spoken normally to each other without spitting out insults and bickering over how they should handle the threat of ThunderClan and WindClan attacking. The fact that her clan's leadership was falling to shambles left a heavy sense of unease in her stomach.

As of now, Acorndapple was sitting in the medicine den, letting the gloomy light from the hole in the den roof wash her pelt in a faint cream glow. She was waiting for Shrikestripe to finish patching up the gaping wound on Fernfur's shoulder, which had not yet healed from the battle.

For some reason, she felt oddly tense, as if a thick and awkward atmosphere wrapped the air. She had hardly exchanged more than a word with her father for quite a while. At least for now, he had his back facing her while Shrikestripe worked on slapping the herbs down onto the wound, unable to see the wary expression marring Acorndapple's face.

"You're good to go! Just be careful when you're hunting. Make sure to come back tomorrow morning," Shrikestripe said cheerfully once she had finished, blinking at the tom.

Fernfur dipped his head, murmuring a quiet 'thank you' before padding towards the entrance. As he passed her, he hardly glanced at her from the corner of his eye, his jaw set. A moment later, he vanished from view out the entrance.

She felt the fur on her spine raise a little. *He didn't acknowledge me when he came in the den, nor when he left!*

I suppose it's my fault for pushing everyone away for so long, she

thought, her shoulders drooping miserably.

"Let's take a look at that tail, poor little duckling." Shrikestripe's voice broke her out of her thoughts, the bubbly she-cat blinking her soft emerald gaze down at her.

Acorndapple couldn't help but feel a little lighter- almost comforted in a way. There was something about her gentle emerald eyes that drew her in, wrapping her in a warm embrace.

She sat down and allowed the medicine cat to peel off the thick leaf wrap plastered across her tail. She winced a little as she caught sight of three large, angry red gashes marring the tail, leaving the fur around it sparse and revealing patches of skin. She quickly looked away. Merely glancing at it caused a jolt of pain to run through her.

"The cuts are very deep," said Shrikestripe, blinking sympathetically before moving towards the herb storage. "They'll definitely scar. Luckily it looks like you're keeping it pretty clean, so you won't have to worry about infection. At least for now."

"How long until you think it's completely healed?" Asked Acorndapple, wishing she could properly move it around for once instead of having it constantly stiff like a branch.

Shrikestripe hummed thoughtfully as she rummaged through the stocks, pulling out several leaves.

"I'd say about another quarter moon," she finally answered, beginning to pad back over to Acorndapple, her jaws clamping on to a small bundle of herbs. "I know it's a while, but if you keep it clean and come to my den often to get the poultice reapplied then it may heal faster."

"Alright," she sighed. A quarter moon of constantly getting checkups in the medicine den would *not* be fun.

Thanks, Sparrowlight, she thought, trying to force back the prickle of anger that rattled her nerves.

She grimaced in pain as the she-cat carefully padded the chewed-up

herbs on the wounds, gritting her teeth as she forced herself to stay still. At least Shrikestripe was much more gentle than Chasingfur when it came to patching up wounds. He would often slap the herbs down mercilessly, dismissing any sort of pain that came in response. As fond as she was of the old tom, she couldn't help but feel glad for this very instance that he was out collecting herbs rather than in the medicine den.

After skillfully wrapping a silky layer of cobweb over the poultice to hold it in place, Shrikestripe had finished, backing up to admire her work: chewed-up herbs plastered delicately on the wound, showing no sign that they would peel off on their own with the protective cobwebs.

"All done!" She exclaimed, eyes gleaming. "You're free to enjoy the rest of your sun-high. Don't forget to return tomorrow morning!"

She nodded a quick '*thanks*' before swiftly ducking out the entrance. Barely even a heartbeat later, the familiar pelts of her littermates flashed in her vision.

Strawfur and Cherryspark were lounging around the fresh-kill pile, clearly having just eaten. As she began to pad towards them, her eye caught sight of a juicy-looking frog at the summit of the pile. She quickened her step, a sudden growl of hunger ripping her stomach.

"Better get that frog before Strawfur decides to eat the rest of the pile," Cherryspark said with a gleam of mischief in her eyes, clearly seeing that Acorndapple had been eyeing it down like a hawk.

"Hey!" Strawfur huffed. "You watched me eat an entire *crow*. How could I possibly have room for more food?"

"Oh, quit lying. That crow was just a light snack for you," Cherryspark teased.

Acorndapple didn't catch how Strawfur reacted as she reached to grab the frog, her back turned to them, but she had a guess that it involved a good cuffing around the ears.

She was too famished to bother talking and immediately tore into her food as soon as she got the chance to settle down. It was only moments later that she felt herself slowly getting lulled into the very edge of sleep...

"Hey, wake up mouse-brain, Sun-high just started and you're already falling asleep?" Cherryspark's teasing voice broke her out of her thoughts.

She lazily smacked her sister's nose with her tail from where she was laying, far too comfortable to get up and give Cherryspark a good whack with her paw.

"You two better not start fighting, I'm *way* too tired from Dawn Patrol to deal with you *kits*!" Strawfur said in a stern voice, mimicking the tone that Drystreak often used.

"If Drystreak catches you mimicking her, oh just say *bye* to your whiskers," Cherryspark warned just after batting away Acorndapple's tail, her eyes flashing playfully as she recognized the pitch in his voice.

"She'll probably be proud of him for trying to knock some sense into you," said Acorndapple, her whiskers twitching.

"*Excuse me?!*" Cherryspark huffed in mock-offense. "I have plenty of sense! Plus, you were the one that smacked me in the first place. I was just sitting here innocently."

"*'Innocently'*, yeah, *sure*." Strawfur rolled his eyes. "Since when have you been innocent? The sheer amount of times you've broken the code is enough to get you *exiled*, mouse-brain."

"Name a time I've broken the code," Cherryspark snapped, lifting her chin smugly.

She and Strawfur both immediately began to list.

"You can't forget all of the times you've flirted with cats from other clans," Acorndapple pointed out, raising a brow.

"Hey, that's not breaking the code," Cherryspark shot back. "If you

list out the whole warrior code, you'll find that there's not a single rule that says: '*no flirting with cats from other clans'*, is there?"

"No, but there's a rule where you can't have *relationships* with cats from other clans," Acorndapple retorted. "And from the amount of times you've flirted with clan rivals then there's certainly a good chance you have a forbidden relationship!"

The conversation suddenly brought her back to the Gathering before the battle, with Sparrowlight. She remembered how the tabby she-cat was obsessed with a tom from RiverClan. For half a second she felt a prick of fondness before it faded as quickly as a raindrop on a pool of water. She forced back the bitter tide of anger rising in her throat.

"I promised Drystreak I would bring her something from the fresh-kill pile, I'll just go ahead and do it now," Acorndapple muttered, her mood suddenly soured by the memories. As she pushed herself to her paws, she spotted Cherryspark and Strawfur exchanging surprised glances.

As she began to rummage through the prey pile, she found herself lost in her thoughts as she reflected on the battle. It had been several days, yet she couldn't shake away the image of Copperleap as he gazed at her with horrified eyes, and Sparrowlight's blood-stained body as Acorndapple claws strayed a whisker away from her neck.

'Believe me when I say this, I wasn't behind Sparrowlight's plan at all.'

'I didn't agree with this. I promise.'

She lashed her tail. *How am I supposed to believe him? He's a* ThunderClan *warrior! His idiot sister ruined everything!*

But even then, the picture of his hazel eyes stuck to her mind like a stubborn cobweb. As much as she hated to admit it, a part of her believed him.

Or at least, she *wanted* to believe him.

She had been so wrapped up in her thoughts that she was hardly

aware of her claws digging into the wing of a sparrow, which she was about to bring to her mother. She hoped Drystreak wouldn't notice its oddly injured state as she grabbed it in her jaws and began to carry it to the nursery.

Hmph, a sparrow.

As she padded in the direction, she glanced at the sky. The sun was gradually leaving its center point. Sun-high would be ending soon.

Honeypelt was fixing the walls of the nursery as she approached, weaving together a few broken pieces of the wall that had been messed up from huge gusts of wind yesterday. Just as she began to slip inside the entrance, he paused and gave her a piercing look with cold golden eyes.

The fur on her back rose, and she quickly tore her gaze away from him, hurrying inside the nursery. *What has his tail in a twist?!*

A shockingly cold thought entered her mind.

What if Shell has turned him against me?

Nausea gripped her stomach. She hadn't even considered how far Shell's venomous words could make it through the clan.

Drystreak was settled in her nest, her eyes glazed over and her tail tip twitching subtly. Acorndapple's five younger siblings were tussling with each other in the cramped space of the nursery, clearly rushing with energy.

For a heartbeat, she was caught in a moment of surprise. The kits had grown by quite a lot. Prancekit, who was standing in front of her, was now almost as tall as her chin! The kits were practically almost six moons old, gradually filling out into their adult sizes. However, they were extremely lanky, showing that they still had quite some time until they were fully grown.

"This den needs to be expanded," Pigeonsilk grumbled nearby, who was batting a moss ball in between his paws, the kits seeming completely uninterested in his futile attempts to start a game. "I can hardly *breathe* in here."

Acorndapple dropped the sparrow in front of Drystreak's nest before furrowing her brows, glancing at the gray-striped tom.

"I could take them outside and watch them for you. It seems the two of you have your tails in a twist from watching them all the time," she offered.

"Please do," Drystreak sighed, her eyelids half-closed with exhaustion.

As soon as she stepped outside, the kits circled her and began to thank her profusely.

"We've been cooped up in there *forever*," Prancekit mewed, her eyes stretched wide to supply to her dramatic tone.

"Yeah. Drystreak and Pigeonsilk hardly ever want to watch us anymore," Luckkit complained, thumping his tail on the ground.

"We don't even *need* to be watched!" Amberkit huffed, lashing her plumy tail. "We're basically old enough to be apprentices. They act like we're little kits that can hardly stand on our own paws."

Acorndapple cast a stern glare onto the younger she-cat, meeting her indignant golden eyes.

"Yes, you're almost apprentices, but older kits might get funny ideas to try sneaking out of camp," she scolded.

"Hmph." Amberkit simply rolled her eyes.

Seeing that she wouldn't be able to change the kit's mind, she decided to move on with a sigh.

"Okay, I'll show you a few battle moves now, I suppose," she mewed. Luckkit immediately started to spring around with excitement once again.

All except Firkit, who stood to the side a little. Acorndapple cocked her head at the smoky gray she-cat.

"Something wrong?" She asked, padding over to the kit. The she-cat

shrugged a little.

After giving her a little nudge to reassure her that she could speak up, Firkit finally spoke.

"Fighting isn't very fun," she confessed. "Is it okay if I just watch?"

Acorndapple flicked her tail in acknowledgment, tilting her head a little.

"If that's what you want," she said.

Firkit's ears perked up a little, copper eyes brightening, before settling down a tail-length away to watch the battle training play out.

I suppose if that's what she wants. But if she doesn't enjoy fighting, then I don't know what game she likes to play. Perhaps just watching is what she likes to do.

Acorndapple padded back over to the rest of the kits, flicking her tail so the four of them would gather up. They bounded over, their eyes shining.

She furrowed her brow, contemplating a simple move she could teach them while they stared at her impatiently with round eyes and flicking tails.

"Hm, how about leap-and-hold?" She finally said. "It's exactly what it sounds like. You have to leap on the cat you're fighting and pin them to the ground."

For half a second she regretted her decision to battle-train them, glancing down at her injured tail.

"Oh, and one last thing," she said quickly. "*Don't* attack my tail."

"Did you get that from the big battle a few days ago?" Asked Flurrykit with enlarged copper eyes, nodding towards the thick layers of poultices draped over the wounds. Acorndapple nodded.

"That's so cool, I've always wanted a scar," Prancekit said, almost

bouncing on her paws.

Amberkit, on the other hand, stuck out her tongue.

"Scars are *nasty*. I would *never* want to ruin my perfectly clean pelt for some ugly mark," she sniffed.

Acorndapple gave the kit a sharp look.

"There are many warriors in the clan who have scars. That's a pretty rude thing for you to say," she said sternly.

"I was just saying I don't want it on *my* pelt," Amberkit muttered.

The words Acorndapple was about to speak didn't have a chance to leave her tongue as she was suddenly bowled over by a blur of golden-brown fur. The force of the impact was enough to cause her to tumble to the ground.

Luckkit had his paws planted firmly over her muzzle, causing her to swallow a bit of dirt in the process, resulting in her letting out a hacking cough. His copper eyes were shining triumphantly at her easy defeat.

"I'm a warrior now!" He declared, raising his sleek tail into the air and lifting his chin smugly.

A heartbeat later he was flung off of her as Amberkit leaped at the tomkit, sending the two into a rolling ball of fluff, growling playfully at each other and kicking with their hind legs.

Acorndapple sat up, shaking her head fondly as she watched the kits. Prancekit and Flurrykit had scuttled over to join the fighting kits, while Firkit attempted to break them apart, although she was quite unsuccessful.

"Acorndapple! There you are, you've been gone for a while!"

She glanced up in surprise as Cherryspark bounded over to her.

"Yeah, I got distracted," she mewed, nodding towards their five younger siblings. "They wanted to learn some battle training."

However, Cherryspark had stopped listening to her, ears pinned across her head and attention focused on something behind her. Acorndapple turned and followed her gaze.

Shell and Brookdaisy were cuddled up right next to each other, clearly putting in no effort to hide their *'lovey-doviness'* with each other. She felt a jolt of disgust run through her body.

Of course, what else would I have expected?

"I didn't realize *they* were together," Cherryspark muttered, her voice low and her eyes flashing with mingled emotions.

She liked Brookdaisy.

"I'm sorry, Cherryspark," she said quietly.

"I thought there was something between us. I guess I was wrong," Cherryspark went on, digging her claws into the ground. "How stupid am I?"

A lot to even like that fox-heart in the first place.

"You deserved better than him anyways, I promise," she said. "He acts like a frog-brain. There was *nothing* good you saw in him. If there was, it was all a figment of your imagination."

Cherryspark didn't reply, simply staring at the ground. She had never seen her sister so defeated before.

Acorndapple moved a slight bit closer, resting her tail comfortingly on her sister's shoulder.

"There's much better cats out there. Like, for say..." Acorndapple gazed around the clearing before her eyes landed on someone. "...Runningheart?"

Cherryspark let out a huff.

"You're not helping, Acorndapple," she muttered quietly.

She clenched her jaw, holding back an offended huff that was about

to leave her mouth. But perhaps her advice wasn't completely off...could she have mistaken the slight gleam in her copper eyes?

She didn't think there was ever anything between Cherryspark and Runningheart. At the same time, she had noticed several times that Cherryspark was particularly friendly with the ginger tom.

I suppose I'll have to see. I'm sure she'll get over Brookdaisy soon enough, she thought, trying to push away the sting of her sister's words.

She had never liked Brookdaisy in the first place. First off, he was loud and very self-centered. But also, he was extremely rude to Acorndapple.

And, it was for a particular reason: *Shell*.

Fine, she turned one cat against me, but I had never liked him that much in the first place, did I? She felt a twinge of hope spark inside of her.

Her gaze moved away from Shell and Brookdaisy to the kits romping around joyfully, eyes drawn to their positive energy. She couldn't help but feel a flutter in her chest, lifting away a bit of the weight that had been lying across her shoulders, driven by determination.

I won't let Shell ruin my life.

Author's note:

Yay we're getting kinda close to 1k reads!! I'm so excited!!

Chapter Twenty-Six

Her ears were pricked as she leaned against the wall of the leader's den, peering into the gloomy cavern. As per usual, Lakestar and Goldpelt were standing face-to-face, their lips drawn into snarls and their eyes flashing with anger in the low, cloud-studded light.

Acorndapple was making a risk eavesdropping so close. But who cared? She had taken plenty of risks before. Hardly anything scared her now, especially listening in on a private argument with the leader and the deputy.

"With how much you're arguing with me I'm starting to think *you're* the one that's been conspiring with Blazestar and Swiftstar," Lakestar snapped.

Her ears twitched. *Of course Lakestar wants to put the blame on someone. But why would she believe someone has been conspiring with the other leaders?*

Her question was answered almost immediately.

"You seriously think *I* told them about the tunnel? Oh please, I think the *entirety* of ShadowClan gave it away. I'm sure they planned to ambush us when we went across the Thunderpath, but it turns out we used the tunnel instead so they found out last second and changed their plan," Goldpelt said, his voice reasonable despite the thick web of anger intermingling his tone.

"Why should I believe that?" Lakestar hissed. "It could very easily be *you!* You've gone against every single plan I've made. Clearly, you want us to lose our chance at retaliation so they can attack us first."

Then don't listen to him? You could easily go on with your plan and ignore him, she thought. She couldn't help but feel annoyed at Lakestar's easily-avoidable despair.

"Why am I being put to blame here? All I've been doing is being a loyal deputy and giving you good advice, yet you continue to blatantly insult me for it. Then you insult me when it's your choice to follow what I've been saying?" He let out a scoff following his words.

"Then I'll find a better deputy. Clearly, your age is showing with all of this horrible decision-making. You'll be better off in the elder's den," said Lakestar, a hint of mocking in her tone.

"Then do it," Goldpelt snapped.

"But there's no time." Lakestar started pacing, swinging her tail back and forth. "They could attack at any given moment. Stupid Blazestar, he can't just leave ShadowClan alone, can he?!"

Yet she still avoids making a new deputy. Acorndapple narrowed her eyes, growing increasingly annoyed with the pale she-cat with every heartbeat.

Who would *be the deputy if she were to make a new one?* She wondered, the question suddenly forming in her mind. *It would obviously have to be a warrior. Still, there are no options because none of the warriors has had an apprentice. Chaffinchflare has, except he's an elder now.*

Her claws curled into the ground as another thought entered the already growing storm in her mind.

What would it be like if I *were deputy?* Her tail twitched as she suddenly imagined the power given to her paws. *I could make a practical plan and end the war myself. Once I do that, I could fix the clan.*

Like exiling Shell...

The idea of being deputy suddenly seemed to be holding itself in a stronger golden light. She had never considered it before, but now that she realized all of the opportunities that came with it, a yearning grew strongly inside her.

I would have to have an apprentice first, her thoughts suddenly

countered.

That can't be too much of a problem. Her gaze swiveled towards the Nursery, where her five younger siblings played a game of warrior at its entrance. They were almost six moons. She could easily be one of their mentors.

How hard can it be?

Goldpelt scoffed, causing her to break out of her thoughts.

"Until you're ready to be a real leader, I'll be... holding back on my advice. I suppose I can't hold you back anymore; you need to learn on your own time."

Goldpelt began to head towards the entrance, causing her to stumble jerkily towards the bramble bush that marked the camp wall. But she came to a halt. *Wait, hiding in a bramble bush is a* terrible *idea!*

But Goldpelt hadn't left the den yet, giving her a chance to creep back to her spot once again and prick her ears to continue listening.

"Finally, I've been asking you to do that *forever*," Lakestar sighed dramatically. "Good, leave me be while I make a plan."

She stretched her ear-tips farther to hear Goldpelt's response. She could picture the scene perfectly in her mind: Goldpelt facing Lakestar with his fur fluffed out and a low growl rumbling in his throat, eyes flashing with anger.

"You better think your plan through because some cats could *die* from your decision-making," he spat.

And that was when he stormed out of the den.

Panicked, she jumped back, flattening herself against the jagged boulder surface of the Shade Rock.

To her relief, the darker patches on her pelt helped her blend in. Plus, Goldpelt seemed too caught up in his fury to notice the young she-cat lingering at the entrance, very clearly eavesdropping.

Holding her breath, she waited for Goldpelt to disappear from view. However, the tom stopped in the center of the clearing.

"All warriors gather around me for patrols!" He yowled, his voice still throbbing with notes of anger.

She skirted a wide circle from the point where she was hiding to around Goldpelt, before scurrying up to the long-furred tom. It didn't take terribly long for more cats to join, including Cherryspark and Strawfur. When she spotted Shell padding over to them, she had to clench her jaw to avoid letting out a furious growl.

The reddish she-cat must've sensed that her fiery gaze was piercing into her pelt. She turned, her calculating yellow gaze meeting her burning one overflowing with a whirlpool of emotions. Their eyes locked for a moment before Shell turned away. Acorndapple was left with her throat stinging with frustration when there was no sign that she had intimidated her at the very least.

"First off, I want a patrol to investigate the ThunderClan border. I'll be leading it myself and taking Runningheart, Cherryspark, Strawfur, and Acorndapple," he announced. Despite the anger that had torn at his voice earlier, it sounded calm just as it usually did. She couldn't help but feel impressed at how easy it was for him to hide his emotions.

Acorndapple had to thank StarClan themselves that she was not on the same patrol as Shell. She could hardly bear to even *look* at her, let alone be on the same patrol as her.

"Fernfur and Shell, I hate to have such a small hunting patrol but the prey pile needs to be restocked," he said, turning to the two of them.

Shell nodded respectfully.

"I understand, but the forest is practically overflowing with prey. Finding any shouldn't be too much of a struggle," she said smoothly.

Shut up show-off.

"Alright, then we're set," Goldpelt said with a dismissive wave of his

tail. "We'll head off now."

Acorndapple froze as a fleeting thought entered her mind, causing her heart to be sent off into a racing frenzy.

Shell and Fernfur! My dad *is being left alone with that murderous cat!*

However, the two patrols were already splitting off to head into their separate directions into the forest. Her mind spun, panicking as she fought to decide what she should do.

If it were to happen, would it really affect me that much?

She quickly shook the thought away. Just because she hadn't held a conversation with her dad for over a moon didn't mean she should stop caring for him. For StarClan's sake, he was her *father*!

"Come on, Acorn!" Cherryspark's voice called from somewhere up ahead.

She opened her jaws to ask last second if she could join the hunting patrol, but then she changed her mind again.

He'll be fine. He's a seasoned warrior.

Forcing herself to peel her eyes away from the section of the woods where both Shell and Fernfur had vanished, she turned and darted up the path that her patrol had trekked through the territory. It didn't take long for her to catch up with them, her breath coming in pants from the burst of sprinting.

"Great StarClan, Acorndapple, where were you?" Cherryspark said as soon as she caught up, rolling her eyes at the mottled she-cat.

"Leave her be, she's catching her breath," Strawfur chided, giving Cherryspark a nudge with his shoulder as he walked.

"Well there's no reason for her to be standing around in the middle of the woods dawdling when she should be patrolling like the rest of us," Cherryspark sniffed.

"Sorry, I'll make sure to be in your line of sight *every second* so you

never lose track of me," Acorndapple said as soon as her breath returned. "Oh, and I'll also make sure to be just as *perfect* as you are at being a warrior and doing all my duties... *Just like you*."

"As you should," Cherryspark told her, completely oblivious to the sarcasm.

Acorndapple just rolled her eyes, her mind still caught on Shell and Fernfur. She didn't feel too into teasing Cherryspark at the moment.

The tabby she-cat clearly noticed her lack of chattiness and instead turned to Runningheart, who quickly glanced away nervously with his ginger ears fluttering in the breeze.

"Runningheart, you've been awfully quiet," Cherryspark said loudly, causing Goldpelt to hiss a "*hush*" at her from up ahead. Of course, she only lowered her voice by a slight notch, completely oblivious to how loud she was.

"I'm just trying to do my duties like any other warrior," he mumbled in response.

"Hey, quiet down, we're almost to the border," Goldpelt snapped, his tail flicking with frustration. They all quickly shut their jaws, respecting the deputy who had his patience stretched thin from all of the arguments with Lakestar.

All except Cherryspark.

"Why do *we* have to be quiet? It's our territory, our side of the border. *ThunderClan* should be qui-"

"Cherryspark, *shut up!*" Acorndapple hissed in her ear. The tabby she-cat shot her a furious glare but obeyed at the least, clamping her jaws shut.

The spindly trunks of the pine trees soon began to thin, the sparse undergrowth of ShadowClan's land lessening even more and becoming a few small thickets dotted here and there. The lush green grass sheltered by the canopies of pine needles gradually became more brittle as it opened up to the clearing next to the Thunderpath, fully exposed to the merciless heat of Greenleaf. She

could feel it crunch uncomfortably beneath her paws without the pine needles to help soften the ground.

A breeze sent from the direction of the opposite end of the Thunderpath whistled through them, bringing the overpowering scent of ThunderClan. She wrinkled her nose, trying not to choke on the air from their musky stench.

Cherryspark squared her shoulders, curling her lip as she glared at the oak treeline. Acorndapple shot her a look from the corner of her eye, while Runningheart gave her a nervous glance.

"They're such cowards! They know they can't beat us in a fight, that's why they had to go crying to WindClan for help," she spat. "I wonder how they would feel if *we* started going to *their* territory!"

When Cherryspark took an aggressive step closer to the border, Runningheart shot forward.

"Uh, don't do that," he said nervously.

"You two, get back here before a ThunderClan patrol decides to show up," Goldpelt snapped.

Acorndapple's tail twitched, watching her sister, while Strawfur sighed next to her.

Just their luck, a loud rustle sounded from the undergrowth at ThunderClan's border.

"Of course," Goldpelt sighed, exasperated. "Hide in the bushes over here, we'll watch what they do."

Thankfully, Cherryspark obeyed, and the five of them hurried towards the thicket close to the edge of the Thunderpath near where the tunnel entrance resided. She shuffled to the edge of it, peering through a few gaps in the leaves.

She leaned forward, eyes searching for a familiar russet-tabby pelt, but at the same time dreading it too.

Instead, a tall cat stepped out from the bushes. All she could make

out was its sleek gray pelt.

As they watched, no other cat stepped out from the undergrowth to join it. She felt her heart drop in her chest. Why would there only be a patrol of a single cat?

Perhaps it's a spy, she thought, pricking her ears. She sank her claws into the ground, feeling an urge to rip them across the cat's muzzle. *Stupid ThunderClan.*

"It's about to cross the Thunderpath," Strawfur breathed, his eyes flashing and his shoulders hunched as if he were prepared to spring out at any moment.

"If it does, we'll attack," Goldpelt muttered, his voice barely more than a whisper.

The pale gray cat stepped closer to the smooth pavement of the acrid Twoleg path, swiveling its head from side to side. Its ears were pricked, and it placed a paw on the surface of the gray rock. Then, it crouched, its eyes locked onto ShadowClan's grassy clearing at the edge of the Thunderpath.

Her breathing quickened as she gazed at the cat. *It's definitely going to cross. What a stupid mistake*.

Then, a second later, it darted across the path.

As soon as it reached the patch of ShadowClan land, they exploded out of the bushes, advancing on the cat. It was a she-cat, and her eyes grew round with horror as she was quickly surrounded.

"I should've known ThunderClan would send a spy in plain sight," Goldpelt spat, glaring furiously at the she-cat. She sank lower to the ground, her heather-blue eyes impossibly round.

From the corner of her eye, Acorndapple spotted Cherryspark bunching her muscles beneath her pelt, eyes locked onto the gray feline. Runningheart, who was next to her, slapped his plumy tail across her flank as if to stop her. Cherryspark shot a glare at the tom but relaxed a little.

Why would he try to stop her?!

"We'll take you back to camp, and you can explain *directly* to Lakestar why you were trying to spy on us," Goldpelt went on, his voice growing a little calmer.

"Wait," the she-cat choked out, wrapping her tail around her flank. "I-I'm not trying to spy. I just wanted to see if I could join ShadowClan."

Oh, that's it.

Acorndapple shot forward, her eyes narrowing into a fiery glare.

"*Spy*!" She snarled. "Do you really think you can just waltz over here and think we'll *believe* you for even a *second?*"

The cat sank even lower to the ground until her belly was brushing against the grass, her paws tucked beneath her.

Acorndapple unsheathed her claws.

Fine. If no one wants to teach this idiot ThunderClan cat a lesson, then I will!

The cat's pelt spiked in horror.

"Wait! But I'm not a spy! I'm expecting kits!"

But by the way her tail was wrapped protectively over her flank, and it was abnormally rounded as well, made it more than clear that she was expecting kits and Acorndapple had acted like an absolute savage to the she-cat. But she continued to stand strong, her tail flared and her eyes glaring at the feline.

"Acorndapple, take a step back," Goldpelt sighed.

She flattened her ears but obeyed anyway, a scowl marring her face.

"Like I said, we'll still take you to camp and see what Lakestar has to say." Goldpelt flicked his tail as a signal for them to head back

towards the forest.

Acorndapple lashed her tail, desperately holding back an argument ready to explode from her jaws. They were letting a *ThunderClan* cat, for StarClan's sake, right into the heart of ShadowClan!

Author's Note:

Do you think she can be trusted? 👀

Chapter Twenty-Seven

The loud *snap* of a branch echoed loudly through the forest. Pebblelily, who had stepped on it, flattened her ears guiltily. In return, Acorndapple shot her a piercing glare.

ThunderClan, just stomping around like badgers!

As soon as the bramble-and-holly-woven barrier that surrounded camp appeared into view, the gray she-cat's eyes darkened nervously. Acorndapple swung her tail up smugly.

And she should be nervous. Hopefully, Lakestar will have enough sense this time to actually refuse to let her join.

Last time a cat had asked to join the clan, it had been Shell. And Lakestar had let her in the clan without a second thought.

Mouse-brained excuse for a leader, if you ask me.

The thought of Shell immediately reminded her of earlier that day, when Goldpelt was organizing patrols and had sent off Fernfur and Shell on a hunting trip alone. She anxiously peered around camp as they entered it, desperately looking to see if they had returned, especially with Fernfur unscathed.

She felt a surge of relief in her chest as she spotted the familiar silver-gray pelt of her father. It was completely unharmed, the visions of gaping wounds and rivers of scarlet proving themselves to be nothing more than a bunch of fears.

"Lakestar better be in camp," Goldpelt muttered as he led the five of them to the center of the clearing.

"Who's *that?*" Drystreak hissed from in front of the nursery, quickly sweeping her kits behind her with her plumy tail. They tried to peer over her, eyes round and owlish as they gazed at the newcomer.

Pigeonsilk, who was settled next to Drystreak, rose to his paws and narrowed his eyes in a suspicious glare. Then, his eyes moved towards the Shade Rock, and Acorndapple followed his gaze.

Lakestar shouldered her way out of her den, halting a tail-length away from the large patrol.

"What's going on?" She demanded, curling her lip as her eyes focused on the deputy.

Acorndapple gave Pebblelily a harsh nudge forward, causing her to stumble a bit as she was caught off guard.

Strawfur gave her a penetrating look.

"*Geez, Acorn, be gentle. She's expecting kits!*" He whispered.

She just shrugged, clenching her jaw and averting his gaze.

"We were at the border, and this ThunderClan cat, who goes by the name of Pebblelily, ran across and asked to join the clan," Goldpelt explained calmly.

"*ThunderClan,* you say?" Lakestar looked mildly interested as she stepped closer to inspect the strange cat. Pebblelily flinched back a little, eyes as round as an owl's.

"Yes." Goldpelt's tail-tip twitched.

By now, most of the clan who weren't on patrol were gathered, watching and waiting to see what Lakestar would do.

"What reason do you have to join? I think it's odd that a *ThunderClan* cat would want to join ShadowClan when we're right in the middle of a war," Lakestar observed, her eyes slitted suspiciously.

She could see Pebblelily take a deep, trembling breath as she met Lakestar's gaze.

"I want to raise my kits *here*, in ShadowClan, not ThunderClan," she said in a shaky voice.

Lakestar tilted her head. She felt sparks of anger growing more powerful with each given heartbeat.

She seriously can't be considering letting her in.

Acorndapple couldn't just stand around any longer.

"The truth is, she's here to *spy*. That's why she's joining in the middle of a war," she burst out, heads turning sharply to her as she spoke.

Strawfur shot her another disapproving glance, which she ignored. *Just because she's pregnant doesn't make her innocent.*

"That could be true," Lakestar hummed. "But I'm more curious to hear what *she* has to say on ThunderClan's secrets... but, now tell me, why would you want to raise your kits here and not your birth clan?" Lakestar leaned forward slightly.

Pebblelily's ears swiveled to and fro nervously, her heather-blue eyes darting around as gazes focused in on her.

She felt smug satisfaction rush through her. *See? Lying! She can't even think of a good lie!*

"Well...er," Pebblelily stammered. "It's for...uh...personal reasons."

"*Personal* reasons?" Acorndapple scoffed, her voice coming out a little louder than she intended.

Lakestar narrowed her eyes at Acorndapple, her sharp cobalt eyes raking over her.

"Shut up," she ordered.

She set her jaw, holding back a huff.

"The only way I would let you join is if you were willing to tell me any important secrets about ThunderClan... and perhaps WindClan too, since both of those StarClan-cursed clans seem to be attached at the tail," Lakestar said, beginning to ramble on.

"Fine, but if that means it's guaranteed my kits will be safe here-"

"Yes. Obviously," Lakestar snapped. "Then do we have a deal?"

Pebblelily shut her eyes tightly for a moment. Then, she opened them again just after letting out a sigh. The word "yes" was barely able to leave her jaws before Acorndapple leaped forward, locking her eyes with Lakestar's.

"This isn't a good idea at all!" She hissed desperately. "ThunderClan can't be trusted. She's a spy!"

"Enough! I won't have any more of this!" Lakestar snarled, her eyes flaming. "*You*, Acorndapple, will be in charge of showing her to the nursery and building her nest. *Clan dismissed*."

Her jaws fell slack with shock as the clan dispersed, leaving her standing there with Pebblelily lingering awkwardly nearby. Ignoring the gray she-cat, she cast a furious glare on the retreating back of Lakestar as she shouldered her way into her den. But the spotted cat showed no sign that she had sensed her burning gaze, leaving Acorndapple feeling angry and lost.

Now I have to deal with her just because I have some sense?!

Pebbelily glanced at her from the corner of her eye.

"If you don't want to, that's fine, I can find the nursery myself," she said quietly. Her voice, which had been shaky earlier, was now firmer, as if she were more certain of herself. She didn't wait for Acorndapple to say anything and turned and padded away, supposedly to where she thought the nursery resided.

That's the elder's den, frog-brain, she thought with a sigh.

No matter how much she despised ThunderClan now and didn't trust them at all, some part of her couldn't let herself stand back and refuse to help.

Just as Pebblelily poked her head inside the elder's den, Acorndapple quickly hurried over to her and awkwardly cleared her throat.

"Er... the nursery is over here. Follow me," she said gruffly, quickly turning in the direction.

Pebblelily didn't have a chance to say anything because of how quickly she padded away, but Acorndapple could sense her surprise.

The outside of the nursery was bare; clearly, Drystreak had bustled everyone inside in a hurry because of the new 'threat'. *But she could still be a threat, of course*.

As soon as Acorndapple entered the den, with Pebblelily lingering awkwardly behind her, Drystreak cast the gray she-cat a hostile look.

"She's staying in the nursery?" Dyrstreak asked irritably.

"I don't want a *ThunderClan* cat here!" Amberkit whined, copying Drystreak's tone of voice.

"Well, too bad, you'll be leaving the nursery soon anyway," Acorndapple snapped.

"There are a few old nests open back here," Pigeonsilk called. "You could gather some fresh moss to add to it."

Acorndapple nodded stiffly before glancing at Pebbelily. It looked as if the last thing she wanted to do was stand in the nursery when Drystreak was moments away from biting her ears off.

Well, she's going to have to learn to live with a ThunderClan cat because clearly we can't get rid of her, she thought testily.

"Then I'll get some moss," Acorndapple announced. Just as she began to head out the entrance once again, Pebblelily touched her tail to Acorndapple's flank, causing her to halt.

"You don't have to build me a nest. I could go do it myself," she offered quickly.

She doesn't want to be in the nursery alone with them.

But she's going to have to learn to live with Drystreak.

"You haven't even gotten a tour of the territory; you would be as lost as a diseased fox if you tried to find any," she pointed out, holding back an eye-roll.

Pebblelily took a step back quickly.

"Oh-oh, uh right- we usually have fresh moss in the medicine den- but yeah that's true... I'll stay here," Pebblelily stammered, her eyes growing as wide as an owl's.

What could have possibly spooked her? Acorndapple thought, flicking her ear in acknowledgement before leaving to head out of the camp.

Perhaps she's just scared of the forest. I mean, we are *ShadowClan- dark and spooky after all.*

Even then, she felt a little uneasy. She knew the cat had more reasons for leaving ThunderClan- reasons that she refused to say. There was something odd about the she-cat, and at that moment, Acorndapple wanted to figure it out.

She was barely focused on her task of scraping off the thick layers of moss bundled on the thick bark of an old cedar tree.

Not that I care that much about a ThunderClan *cat, but clearly, there's something off. If I ever had kits- not that I'm planning on having any anytime soon- then I wouldn't want to join another clan just because of 'personal reasons.'*

It didn't take long for her to collect a suitable amount of moss, enough to make a large nest. Bundling it up in her jaws, she made her way back to camp.

When she returned to camp, Drystreak was outside watching the kits play, her ears flat across her head. She had to dodge the playfighting kits to avoid tripping over them before entering the nursery.

Pebblelily was sitting towards the back of the den while Pigeonsilk attempted to make conversation with her. She seemed a little bit more relaxed than she had earlier, but her heather-blue eyes were

still wide and shadowed with something unreadable.

She looked even more nervous as Acorndapple padded into the den and dropped her bundle of moss.

There was an old nest which she used to re-cushion with the fresher moss, while Pigeonsilk continued to talk to Pebblelily.

"Brookdaisy is the other permanent queen, but he's hardly ever in here," Pigeonsilk was saying as she focused on her task.

"Oh... uh, why not?" Pebbelily asked quietly.

Pigeonsilk just let out a snort.

"For who knows what? When we were kits, we both *agreed* to being permanent queens together; now he seems more interested in doing warrior things," he muttered before letting out a sigh.

He's probably too busy with Shell gossiping about me, she thought irritably.

"Does ThunderClan have any permanent queens?" Acorndapple asked casually.

She seemed a little taken aback by the question but answered anyway.

"No, we don't. I didn't even know the role existed before," she confessed. "I guess ShadowClan's ways are a bit different from ThunderClan's."

Her eyes were fond for a moment as if she recalled old memories. Then, a moment later, they grew dark again, and she clamped her jaws shut.

Something definitely happened, she thought, ears twitching with interest.

"I'm going out to stretch my legs," Pigeonsilk said with a yawn. "I might be getting den fever from being in here too long."

An awkward silence settled over the two of them as the gray-striped tom vanished through the entrance. She hurried to finish the task, eager to leave the den as well and escape the uncomfortable atmosphere.

"Uh." Pebblelily's voice broke the silence. "Thank you for making my nest. I know you don't like ThunderClan cats that much, but I still appreciate it."

Acorndapple was lost for words for a moment. She had acted like a fox-heart to the she-cat; personally, if the roles were swapped, she definitely would've clawed her ears off. But surprisingly, Pebblelily was *grateful?*

"You don't have to thank me," she finally said in a gruff tone.

Acorndapple glanced at her from the corner of her eye to watch her reaction before adding, "I know you went through a lot."

Pebblelily's tail flared up with surprise. For a moment, Acorndapple seemed to be witnessing the gray she-cat caught in a turmoil of thoughts, her eyes flashing with many unreadable expressions, memories that Acorndapple would never ask to live through. Something had gone horribly, horribly wrong.

"I never wanted this," she choked out, her eyes welling up as she glanced down at her swollen flank. "I care for them so much, and I know it's not their fault... but I just wish they weren't *his*."

Oh, StarClan, I hope this isn't what I think it is.

"How long ago were you made a warrior?" Acorndapple asked quietly.

Pebblelily flattened her ears, glancing away.

"Only several moons ago," she whispered.

Acorndapple's tail fluffed up a little. *I knew it. Great StarClan, do I even want to know who 'him' is?*

She could not make herself ask any further, and clearly, Pebblelily

wasn't ready to talk about her past anyway. So Acorndapple rose to her paws, pushing together the finally fragments of the nest, before leaning forward to wrap her tail around her shoulders comfortingly.

"It's not your fault," she said quietly, while Pebblelily shut her eyes tightly.

Maybe it's not ThunderClan itself that's bad. Perhaps it's just some of the cats in it.

Author's note:

Also, yay or nay to the new cover? Honestly, I can't decide. I still really like the old one, but I feel like I need something new. Idk, please help me choose 🐞

another note(4/18/2025)- fixed some syntax, grammar, and spelling. Lesson learned: don't write when you're half asleep lol. In the future, when I finish the story, I'll be going back and editing every chapter (ESPECIALLY chapters 21 - up until now haha.)

Chapter Twenty-Eight

The air was heavy with humidity as she padded down the slope, her fur fluffed out with discomfort and her jaws parted to draw in deep breaths of air. The shadows were lengthened to envelop the patrol, darker as masses of clouds shrouded the sky. It was clear that rain would be arriving soon.

"Quicken your paces; the rain could wash away any important scents." Fernfur's cold voice sliced through the air, his long limbs eating up the ground as he lengthened his stride.

Acorndapple flattened her ears as she followed at her father's heel. She was eyeing his gray pelt cautiously.

He hasn't said much to me at all this entire patrol, and he's acting more irritable than usual. It's as if he hardly cares about his old litter!

Although he *had* at least *spoken* to her, she noticed that he barely even acknowledged Cherryspark's presence. In fact, before leaving the camp, she had caught him shooting Cherryspark a piercing glare.

Perhaps we're the disappointments. Maybe he's more eager about our younger siblings because they have a better chance of not becoming 'failures' in his eyes.

She glanced at Cherryspark from the corner of her eye. Her golden-brown sibling was dragging her paws as she walked, her gaze locked firmly on the ground. She had never seen her sister look so downcast before, and it sent an unsettling jolt through her stomach.

Should I ask her what's wrong after the patrol? Her mind debated, glancing away from Cherryspark. Then, a moment later, her thoughts immediately turned away from the idea.

Why should I? If she's disappointed about Fernfur ignoring her, then she

can deal with it. Feelings shouldn't be shared anyway, it causes more trouble than there already is!

Fernfur raised his tail sharply, causing the entire patrol to slam to a halt. She dug her claws into the ground to avoid bowling over Honeypelt, who was also on the patrol. He muttered something grumpily under his breath, and she shot the tom a glare, fluffing up her tail defensively before turning purposely toward Fernfur.

"We'll go and head along the Thunderpath, starting from WindClan's border," he announced.

Honeypelt flicked his tail.

"Goldpelt told us to head solely to the ThunderClan part of the border. But I suppose if you want to disobey orders, then go ahead," he grumbled.

Acorndapple swung her gaze towards the long-furred tom, the hairs along her spine rising.

"And how would you like it if someone trespassed on the WindClan part yet we missed it because of *you?*" She spat, lashing her tail. *I've had it with this frog-brain!*

Honeypelt's fur immediately began to fluff up, his gaze narrowing into a furious glare. That was when Cherryspark suddenly stepped forward.

"Yeah, we shouldn't *break rules*. Goldpelt told us to go to the ThunderClan border," Cherryspark sniffed. She thought she could detect a hint of a sneer hidden in her voice.

The three of them gazed at her, clearly waiting for her reply. However, she kept her maw shut, a snarl beginning to creep into her features. She was mostly caught off guard by her sister's lack of interest in taking Acorndapple's side.

Yet her sister refused to meet her gaze, and in fact, her gaze mostly seemed focused on Fernfur.

"Well then, let's go," Fernfur huffed, turning around and stalking

towards the ThunderClan border.

Acorndapple fell to the back of the patrol, glaring with defeat at the backs of the other patrol members. A rumble of thunder shook the sky, sending the birdsong of the forest into a deafening silence and complementing her sunken mood. She dragged her paws across the ground grudgingly, wanting nothing else than for the patrol to be over with.

All we ever do is border patrols! Every single day, we have to check the ThunderClan border. When will it end?

She certainly wasn't about to admit that the argument from moments ago had set her off. She had basically defended Fernfur's idea, yet he didn't even back her up! Neither had Cherryspark. Her sister *always* sided with her. They were as close as could be as kits, constantly defending each other's backs. What had changed?

Are we growing apart?

It was true that she had grown closer to Strawfur. It used to be her and Cherryspark as the best friends of the three of them, but now it seemed things had changed.

Caught in her whirlwind of thoughts, she barely noticed the flashes of color on the opposite side of the Thunderpath. As they drew closer, she glanced up, realizing a ThunderClan patrol stood at their oak forest treeline, their pelts masked with shadows from overhanging leaves.

Her breath faltered in her throat as her gaze cut across a familiar dark ginger pelt.

He was standing between a black she-cat with a ginger splash above her nose, whom she recognized as one of Copperleap's siblings named Clovershade, and a small black and white tom whose name she couldn't recall. About a tail-length away, inspecting the edge of the Thunderpath, was Thistlebriar, the deputy. His hazel eyes were darkened, and the ginger-and-black fur along his spine was prickling. It seemed clear that ThunderClan's deputy was too caught in his task to notice the approaching ShadowClan patrol.

Honeypelt immediately stalked to the edge of the pavement, his gray pelt slowly rising and his claws sliding outward. The tom was clearly eager for trouble.

After a long moment with Thistlebriar busy inspecting the border of their territory, the black and white tom padded forward and muttered something into his ear. That was when he finally looked up, noticing the aggressive stance of Honeypelt facing them. His tail immediately began to lash furiously.

"Trying to act intimidating?" The tom spat. Cherryspark and Fernfur immediately drew closer to the Thunderpath, growls rumbling in their throats. Acorndapple stood behind them, scarcely paying attention to their response as the prospect of a skirmish drew closer. Instead, her gaze was fixated on Copperleap, her tail-tip twitching with an inner conflict. Oddly enough, the jab of anger in her chest that she usually experienced upon seeing ThunderClan warriors wasn't as intense as usual. Instead, her ears were pricked, and her tail was raised.

She even felt nervous as she padded closer to the Thunderpath, taking her place next to Cherryspark. She dug her claws into the dirt and narrowed her eyes, forcing herself to keep the same imposing stance. Still, she couldn't help but notice when Copperleap's gaze moved sharply towards her, noticing her presence for the first time. She could feel the hairs on her spine raise self-consciously.

"You're acting oddly confident today, ShadowClan. It wasn't like that at the last fight on the border; something *changed?* Hmm?" Thistlebriar hissed. Towards the end of his sentence, his voice had lowered dangerously, and the way he had emphasized the word 'changed' left an unsettled feeling in her body.

Thistlebriar had always been a respectable deputy, even during the war. He seems so... off now.

The way he stared at the four of them with his hazel eyes in a crazed manner caused her stomach to churn uncomfortably.

It seemed that Acorndapple was not the only one to notice this.

Fernfur stepped forward, meeting the deputy's gaze calmly.

"We're concerned, truthfully," said her father in a smooth voice. "You've always been such a... collected deputy. You seem a little worried there. Are you hiding something?"

The fellow cats on Thistlebriar's patrol, including Copperleap, glanced significantly at their deputy. Acorndapple leaned forward curiously, her ears swiveling as she wondered what their expressions could have possibly meant.

Thistlebriar straightened his posture, yet the look didn't leave his eyes. Instead, he held Fernfur's gaze as he seemed to realize the short-furred tom was the leader of the patrol.

"I'm just curious if you've happened to have seen a warrior of mine," he said roughly, his tail continuing to lash back and forth. Copperleap suddenly flattened his ears, much to her curiosity. Then, Thistlebriar continued, his eyes dark. "She goes by the name Pebblelily, a dark gray she-cat. We haven't seen her for several sunrises."

Acorndapple's heart jolted in her chest. That's why he had seemed so off-putting. Clearly, he was desperate for a warrior back, especially because of the war.

But why should we help those fox-hearts? They're our enemies; a warrior going missing on their side is nothing but a benefit for us.

The rest of her patrol seemed to be on the same train of thought as her. Honeypelt glared at the deputy, curling his lip.

"It doesn't concern us where your warriors run off to. It sounds like ThunderClan's problem, and *ThunderClan's* problem only. Unless you'd like to add WindClan in the mix, since both of your clans are apparently joined together now," Honeypelt sneered.

"What *really* concerns us is the fact that you think we would help you with that issue anyways," Fernfur added, lifting his chin smugly.

Acorndapple couldn't help but feel a surge of relief in her chest at

her clanmates' reactions. Pebblelily wished to raise her kits in ShadowClan rather than ThunderClan; it would do her no good if her former clan knew of her whereabouts. But what concerned her even more was *'him'*, the unknown cat that was the father of Pebblelily's kits. She hardly had an idea who he was, but she had a feeling that if he knew of her location, things certainly wouldn't end well.

She must've fled ThunderClan to get away from him. He's a dangerous cat by the sound of it, she thought, gazing curiously at the patrol as she wondered who the mysterious tom was.

"What could I have expected?" Thistlebriar seethed through clenched fangs. He angrily turned around, flicking his tail in a quick, sharp manner, seemingly a signal for the rest of his patrol to follow him as he stormed into the forest.

Acorndapple watched as the patrol slowly began to trail after him. But Copperleap paused for a moment, his eyes boring into hers. Acorndapple flattened one ear, taken aback by the intensity in his gaze.

His jaws moved silently, mouthing a sentence that she completely missed from how caught off guard she was. The only word she could catch was 'Gathering,' but besides that, she could only stare at him dumbfoundedly.

The only suitable response was to shrug her shoulders and turn away, about to start catching up with the rest of the patrol. But that was when she noticed Cherryspark standing near her, jaws slack and copper eyes boring into her. Then, wordlessly, her sister turned and raced after the patrol.

She read what he said! What could have possibly made her so shocked?

Her stomach twisted nervously as she hurried after the patrol, wishing that there weren't so many unanswered questions.

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Acorndapple was lying in the nursery, her ears flattened at the

sound of Lakestar's and Goldpelt's irritated voices ringing outside the den. In the background, the gentle drumming of rain was barely noticeable against their yowling voices.

"Great StarClan, when do they stop arguing?" Acorndapple complained.

"Does this happen a lot?" Pebblelily asked, pinning her ears behind her head.

"Oh, *all* the time," she muttered.

Nestled in the sheltered walls of the nursery next to her friend, she could at least find comfort in the more secure environment to let her thoughts roam. Her father acting as if she and her littermates were a burden, Cherryspark seemingly growing apart from her, the dispute at the border, the exchange with Copperleap, and Cherryspark catching what the ThunderClan tom had mouthed. Every single event that had happened on the patrol left her fur on end and her claws kneading nervously into the nest she was lying on.

Her thoughts turned to Pebbelily as she noticed the gray she-cat watching her. Even after the few sunrises she had been in the clan, she was yet to figure out more about the queen's past. Every time a conversation took a turn close to anything that went further into her backstory, she would quickly change the subject.

"I hope it stops soon... they always want to talk about the war and stuff. I really hope it doesn't all lead to destruction or something like that," said Pebblelily, breaking her out of her thoughts.

"That's a pretty ominous way of speaking," Acorndapple mused, flicking her tail.

"I'm sorry," she said quickly, glancing at her from the corner of her eye.

Acorndapple narrowed her eyes.

"For what?"

Pebblelily cast her a look of surprise.

"For being so ominous," she mewed.

Great StarClan, she says sorry a lot!

"Well, you don't have to be sorry for that. I was just observing."

"Oh." Pebblelily went silent, her shoulders tense.

Acorndapple gazed at her, opening her jaws slightly as she wondered if she should ask what was wrong. This wasn't the first time she had done this; she would apologize for something or other, then become quiet. But if she was going to say anything, she was cut off as Lakestar let out a bellowing yowl that shook the ground.

"*Pebblelily! I want you out here now!*"

The queen shot up in her nest, her heather-blue eyes impossibly round. Acorndapple nervously swept her tail back and forth.

"Come on, let's go," Acorndapple muttered.

Pebblelily shot past her out of the entrance, while Acorndapple quickly followed.

The entire clan was silent as the two of them left the nursery, hardly caring about the rain soaking their pelts as they watched the scene take place. Both of the medicine cats were peeking their heads out from the medicine cat den, while nearby, Brownsnout and Goldennewt had broken off from their conversation and now had their heads turned towards the center of the clearing. Drystreak and Fernfur were seated close to the fresh-kill pile, and even the rowdy kits near them had stopped play-fighting and were gazing at Lakestar with impossibly round eyes. It seemed that most of everyone was in camp, and their eyes were all watching the furious form of Lakestar.

Lakestar's ears were flat against her head and cobalt eyes flaming with fury as she focused her gaze on Pebblelily. Acorndapple stood a tail-length away from the two of them, curling her lip as she prepared to launch herself to the queen's aid.

"Speak up! When will they attack?!" The spotted she-cat demanded while Pebblelily flattened herself to the ground.

"I-I don't know," she stammered, shrinking beneath her pelt.

Acorndapple lashed her tail furiously.

She's acting like Pebblelily is hiding things! The fox-heart!

"You *must* know something! You *agreed* to tell me information about ThunderClan- if you don't spit it out, then I'm sending you straight back to that carrion dump!" She snarled, looming over the she-cat.

"Don't do that!" Pebblelily gasped. "They're planning something big- I'm sorry, I don't know more. Blazestar doesn't tell us his plans," she said, practically stumbling over her words as she fought to say something before Lakestar decided to lash out.

By now, the entire clan had gathered, watching with interest.

"Don't lie," Lakestar's voice had grown dangerously low.

"The only thing he told us about was the ambush at the Thunderpath," Pebblelily said, shrinking backwards. "Um... well- he does talk with Swiftstar and another warrior sometimes in his den. That's how I know they're planning things."

Another warrior? Acorndapple's ears pricked with interest. Pebblelily hadn't said either of ThunderClan's or WindClan's deputies, so there must've been another cat that was responsible for the plans.

A cat that's not a deputy but is given high power. That could be dangerous.

"So who told them about the tunnel?" Lakestar demanded.

"I don't think-" Goldpelt began, but was cut off as she swung her furious gaze over to him, causing his jaws to slam shut.

"I-I don't know," Pebblelily stammered.

Lakestar let out a deep sigh, closing her eyes tightly for a moment.

Then, she opened them again, focusing on Pebblelily once more.

"I'll allow you to stay in the clan, I suppose. I hope you're not lying, though, because these claws have broken necks before," Lakestar said casually. Then, her eyes turned dangerous as they moved beyond the she-cat and swept around the clan. "Now, which one of you told them about the tunnel?"

The entire clan grew silent, jaws falling slack at her accusation. But there was an opportunity, one that entered her mind in that very split second. It was as if time had frozen.

I could tell the clan that it was her. Her gaze moved to where the reddish-brown she-cat stood. *My problem could be over. She could be exiled.*

It was decided.

But she didn't have a chance. It was too late.

Shell stepped forward, her yellow eyes gleaming.

"It was Acorndapple."

Author's note-

yay I can finally post!

Unfortunately, as much as I enjoy writing this story, I'm losing interest. So, I'll be taking a little break to help regain that old spark again. But I still want to do one last update, which will be on April 26th! Once that update comes around, I'll let you know where this story is heading next. :)

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"*What?*"

Acorndapple couldn't move her eyes away from Shell as she stood in front of Lakestar, her chin lifted smugly, yet her gaze serious.

"She doesn't have any proof!" Acorndapple began to protest, her throat stinging with fury. But Lakestar cast her a sharp look, one that forced her to slam her jaws shut.

"I don't have straight-up evidence, but I do have *something* that may remind you about some of her actions in the past, something that could suggest it *was* her," Shell said smoothly, glancing around as if willing other cats to listen to her.

She dug her claws into the ground, her heart beating rapidly in her chest. Not a single cat had stepped up to protest. Although a cat did step up, Brookdaisy, yet he was nodding as if willing to listen to her words.

"You can't forget when she apparently overheard Blazestar making a plan to attack on the half-moon. Remember, *that attack never happened*," Shell pointed out. "Then, on the night of the full moon, we were ambushed. And that was more than a quarter moon after she warned us!"

"Get to the point," Pigeonsilk grumbled.

Shell met the striped tom's gaze calmly.

"She used that warning as a distraction, so when the real ambush came, we would be caught off guard. Plus, using that time between the warning and the ambush, she could've gone to ThunderClan and told them about the tunnel to make it easier for them."

She wished for the earth to cave in at that very moment and

swallow either her or Shell- she did not care if it happened to either of them as she wished desperately for the embarrassment and scorching feeling of betrayal to disperse. She felt horribly small in her own pelt, and at the way her clanmates' gazes raked over her made her feel as if she wasn't even a cat anymore, rather some fox that had made its way into camp.

"Is this true?" Lakestar demanded. Her cobalt eyes, although usually gleaming with ferocity, now seemed to pierce directly into her soul.

She felt defeated in that very instance. *No one*, not even her family, rushed to defend her. What was even the point of fighting for her place in the clan when every single relationship she had built was all for nothing? Did no one really care for her that much? Her parents hardly dared to look at her, and her littermates watched with round, shocked gazes.

I could just say she's right and leave. I could start over and find a new beginning, somewhere where I won't be tormented by a cat that wants to destroy me.

But where *could* she go? ShadowClan was her only home, the one she had known for so long- she couldn't just leave everything she had worked for all behind. And the fact that Beetlepelt's grave still had fresh soil on top made her feel as if there was a deeper connection to ShadowClan- one that told her she couldn't leave. At least, not yet.

She had a choice- stay and fix what had been dealt, or leave and find a new beginning. But she knew already that the decision had been made before she could even take her first breath- a decision that had been written in the stars. A *destiny*.

"It's not true," she said after letting out a deep sigh. Her voice had arrived calmer than she had expected.

"But she doesn't even have evidence," Shell pointed out, a snicker hidden at the edge of her tone.

"Just kick her out already! We can't have traitors in the clan!" Brookdaisy yowled, lashing his tail.

The clan was sent into an uproar. She could hardly make out what a single cat was shouting as each voice rose higher and higher, fighting to make themselves heard.

"*Exile her! She got my sister killed!*" Honeypelt yowled, his voice so agonizingly loud that it seemed to shake the ground. Acorndapple flattened her ears, her chest growing hollow.

"*Quiet!*" A voice shouted, causing the entire clan to fall into a deafening silence. It wasn't Lakestar or Goldpelt that had yowled the order; instead, it was Hazyfall, the mediator's bronze eyes cool as she padded forward to address the clan.

"We must give both of them a chance to speak," she said calmly. "Shell has already had her's. Acorndapple, it you wish to defend your side then you can go ahead."

Her heart began to race in her chest as eyes turned to face her. What *could* she say? Shell's story already seemed believable enough. She didn't really *have* any evidence to back herself up.

There was no other option but to tell the truth.

"It doesn't make any sense to me why you think *I* would want to get my family killed in the claws of ThunderClan," she said, her voice wavering slightly as the sting of anger returned. "*I* was the one lied to. I never overheard Blazestar and Swifstar devising a plan to attack on the half-moon. Instead, I was told by a cat from ThunderClan, who ended up using that as a distraction so when the ambush truly arrived, we were caught off guard."

Her shoulders sagged with relief as soon as it left her chest. If she did get exiled, then she'd rather do it with her clan knowing the truth.

"So betraying the clan by having a friendship with a *ThunderClan* cat?" Shell asked, rolling her eyes. "It just gets worse and worse!"

"Who?" Lakestar asked sharply, glaring at Acorndapple. *She's not happy that I lied to her.*

"Sparrowlight," she replied without missing a beat. She had no

problem ratting out the traitor of a former 'friend.'

From the edge of the crowd, she spotted Pebblelily flinching as if claws were raked across her nose. Acorndapple glanced at her, narrowing her eyes with a mix of confusion and suspicion.

"So then why shouldn't I believe you told ThunderClan about the tunnel when you *clearly* have a *friend* in the clan?" Lakestar snapped, stepping closer until she seemed to be looming over her. Acorndapple forced herself to remain tall and not shrink beneath her pelt.

"She was never a friend. I was foolish to believe she could even tell me the truth in the first place. I'd never fall for that again." Acorndapple's voice was almost pleading now.

"Lakestar, it couldn't have been her. ThunderClan watched us use the tunnel instead of crossing over it during the ambush," said Goldpelt, his voice calm and almost gentle as if he were explaining it to a kit.

Lakestar flattened her ears, looking uncertain now at Goldpelt's claim.

Acorndapple's tail twitched hopefully. *Is she convinced now?*

Just as Lakestar was about to open her jaws to speak again, Runningheart stepped forward. The skittish tom seemed even more nervous now that he had cut off the leader, and she was glaring at him with annoyance, yet he went along anyway.

"Even if you still think it's her, I don't believe it's true. She was mentored by my brother. Beetlepelt was a respectable warrior. He wouldn't teach her to betray the clan," he said. Then, he quickly stepped back to his place next to Cherryspark, licking his chest fur with embarrassment.

Acorndapple stared at the tom in astonishment. For one, she had never heard the tom speak for so long without stuttering. Secondly, she was surprised he had even defended her in the first place.

From the corner of her eye, she spotted Shell curling her lip. The

mention of Beetlepelt had clearly set her off. Acorndapple felt a flash of satisfaction course through her.

"Regardless of whether she's telling the truth or not, I want her under high watch. I can't afford a traitor in the clan right in the middle of a war. Clan dismissed."

Acorndapple immediately felt her heart drop in her chest. Just as she had started to believe she could escape the confrontation with at least *some* trust left for her within her clanmates, it was thrown away.

She felt her throat grow raw with fury, such an intense anger that she hadn't felt since Beetlepelt's death. Perhaps it wasn't too late to change her choice.

Maybe fixing what had been dealt was never the right choice all along- perhaps there was a different path. It seemed now that Shell's journey to destroy her couldn't be deterred. She wouldn't let herself stand back and hope for the vicious cycle to end when really, Shell's determination to break her life into fragments wouldn't stop.

Fine, then I'll defend myself. Even if it requires claws.

Author's note-

As I said in the last chapter, this will be the last update! The next time I post won't be until (most likely) May 24th. I want to take a little break to catch up with my writing.

For the time being, I'll probably just be editing the story and adding other little cool stuff.

Anyways, I hope you have a great day/night and remember to drink water!

Part Two

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Allegiances

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Leader:

Lakestar - A white and speckled gray she-cat with dark blue eyes(mate: Pigeonsilk)

Deputy:

Goldpelt - A long-furred pale gray and white tom with a large scar on his back and amber eyes

Medicine Cats:

Chasingfur - A dark ginger tom with silver eyes

Shrikestripe - A long-furred white and gray tabby she-cat with emerald eyes

Mediators:

Hazyfall - A pale gray smoke she-cat with bronze eyes

Goldennewt - A speckled black tom with golden eyes

Brownsnout - A long-furred white and brown tabby tom with emerald eyes

Warriors:

Drystreak - A long-furred dorsal-striped pale ginger she-cat with copper eyes (mate: Fernfur)

Fernfur - A silver tabby tom with gold eyes

Honeypelt - A long-furred dorsal-striped silver and white tom with golden eyes

Shell - A reddish-brown she-cat with yellow eyes and a scar across her face(mate: Brookdaisy)

Runningheart - A long-furred dark ginger tabby tom with sage eyes

Acorndapple - A golden brown/black mottled she-cat with sunlit-ice eyes and scars on her tail

Cherryspark - A muscular golden-brown tabby she-cat with copper eyes

Strawfur - A golden smoke and white tom with dark blue eyes

Apprentices:

Luckpaw - A golden-brown tabby tom with a white belly and legs and copper eyes

Amberpaw - A golden tabby she-cat with golden eyes

Firpaw - A smoke-gray she-cat with copper eyes

Flurrypaw - A long-furred gray spotted she-cat with copper eyes

Prancepaw - A long-furred golden-brown ticked she-cat with golden eyes

Queens:

Pebblelily - A dark gray she-cat with heather-blue eyes(expecting kits)

Brookdaisy - An unusually dappled black tom with blue eyes(permanent queen)

Pigeonsilk - A gray tabby tom with silver eyes(permanent queen)

Kits:

N/A

Elders:

Chaffinchflare - A light brown smoke and white tom with sage eyes

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Leader:

Blazestar - A golden tabby tom with pale yellow eyes

Deputy:

Thistlebriar - A dark ginger tom with a small black spot near his muzzle and hazel eyes

Medicine Cats:

Mistywillow - A long-furred dark gray she-cat with cobalt eyes

Snailpounce - A completely black tom with yellow eyes

Mediators:

Nettleblossom - A light brown tabby tom with pale yellow eyes

Ferncurl - A calico she-cat with hazel eyes

Warriors:

Nimbleleaf - A small black and white tom with amber eyes

Marigoldgaze - A golden and white tabby tom with amber eyes(mate: Swallowflight)

Doeleap - A russet tom with brown eyes(mate: Applebriar)

Applebriar - A tortoiseshell she-cat with hazel eyes

Copperleap - A russet tabby tom with hazel eyes

Sparrowlight - A light brown tabby she-cat with doe-brown eyes

Clovershade - A black she-cat with a ginger nose bridge and hazel eyes

Apprentices:

N/A

Queens:

Swallowflight - A brown tabby she-cat with cream dapples and yellow eyes(caring for Oakkit, Saplingkit, Palekit, and Fallowkit)

Ferncurl - (expecting kits, see mediator list for description)

Kits:

Oakkit - A long-furred brown tabby she-cat with hazel eyes

Saplingkit - A ginger and white she-cat

Palekit - A pale brown tom

Fallowkit - A dark ginger she-cat

Elders:

Foxdawn - A golden and white tabby she-cat with yellow eyes

Specklelight - A ginger she-cat with orange eyes

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Leader:

Swiftstar - A silver and white tom with green eyes

Deputy:

Chervilfleck - A cream she-cat with light green eyes

Medicine Cats:

Silverbreeze - A silver-gray tom with yellow eyes

Petalsight - A white she-cat with gray splotches

Mediators:

N/A

Warriors:

Falconcloud - A very dark gray tom with blue eyes(mate: Creekflight)

Apprentice, Curlpaw

Swoopstem - A light brown tom(mate: Mothleaf)

Mothleaf - A cream she-cat with dark green eyes

Eveninglily - A brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice, Brightpaw

Redblaze - A long-furred ginger she-cat with green eyes

Apprentices:

Brightpaw - A silver and white she-cat with hazel eyes

Curlpaw - A mottled brown tom with dark green eyes

Queens:

Creekflight - A dark brown she-cat with hazel eyes(caring for Hazelkit, Harekit, and Bubblekit)

Kits:

Hazelkit - A light gray tom with blue eyes

Harekit - A blue-gray she-cat with hazel eyes

Bubblekit - A light brown she-cat with blue eyes

Elders:

N/A

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Leader:

Otterstar - A dark brown and white tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Deputy:

Slatesplash - A blue-gray she-cat with silver eyes

Medicine Cats:

Mottledcreek - A mottled brown and gray she-cat with a long, plumy tail

Mediators:

Sootfang - A black and white she-cat with yellow eyes

Warriors:

Swiftberry - A long-furred dark gray she-cat with silver eyes(mate: Shellfall)

Sandflame - A pale ginger she-cat with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Fernpaw

Beechspots - A black and white tom with yellow eyes

Apprentice, Eveningpaw

Shellfall - A brown tabby tom with green eyes

Seedpounce - A long-furred blue-gray tom with blue eyes

Apprentice, Pebblepaw

Rapidmist - A dark gray she-cat with green eyes

Ripplefrost - A long-furred brown tabby tom with silver eyes

Apprentices:

Pebblepaw - A light brown tabby she-cat with silver eyes

Fernpaw - A dark gray tom with green eyes

Eveningpaw - A very dark gray she-cat with emerald eyes

Queens:

N/A

Kits:

N/A

Elders:

Covelight - A small blue-gray she-cat

Ivystream - A gray tom with white splotches

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Chapter Thirty

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The overlapping branches of the towering pines that grew far above the holly and bramble barrier of camp shifted and creaked beneath the stirrings of a warm Greenleaf wind, the intricate network of pine needles almost completely masking the cerulean sky, dipped with a warm tinge of orange towards the horizon as the sun gradually drifted down to its nest. The wind, barely more than a breeze, swept through her short-furred coat, ruffling the spiky bits of fur around the nape of her neck and at the base of her tail. It was soothing in a way to hear the familiar sounds of ShadowClan's forest: the soft chirrups of a goldcrest perched high up in the canopy, the gentle croaks of frogs as they splashed around in puddles brought by a recent rain, and the hum of insects buzzing through the air. There would never be anything, *anything*, as lively and beautiful as ShadowClan's forest, not to Acorndapple.

She hopped over a small puddle, her tail-tip barely flitting over its surface. It caused a small ripple in turn, and she paused for a moment to admire the tiny detail before it faded away almost as quickly as it had appeared. Soon, the earth would swallow up the rain's offerings, but eventually, StarClan would bring more rain, and the cycle would repeat. It was comforting in a way to know that even the air around them had its own routine.

It was unheard of for Greenleaf to have so much rainfall. The clan territories were usually gripped by the sharp claws of drought; Acorndapple couldn't help but thank StarClan that her first Greenleaf as a warrior came with rain to keep the prey running smoothly. Though she had experienced a drought before, it had been last Greenleaf, and she was merely a kit. She certainly wouldn't remember, plus as a kit, she would never focus on struggles like a drought.

The gleam of her brother's golden fur caught her eye. Stifling a purr of amusement, she spotted Strawfur with mud completely coating his legs and a cross expression marring his face. Out of instinct, she began to pad over to him but stopped in the middle of her tracks as her mind was caught in an inner battle.

It hadn't been too long since the confrontation in camp, and she still couldn't shake away the lingering sting of her family's silence as they refused to jump to her aid. *They bothered to listen to Shell, despite how wrong she was.* None *of them stepped up for me, besides Goldpelt and Runningheart.*

Ever since then, she had remained distant from her siblings. Conversations were curt, and overall, she did her best to avoid them. She still couldn't shake off the sting of betrayal. It latched onto her like a tick, one that was impossible to remove.

With her mind leaning towards avoiding her brother once again, she turned away and began to pad to the warrior's den.

However, it seemed that she did not go unnoticed by Strawfur. Much to her annoyance, she heard the footfalls of her brother behind her as he strode over to her.

Strawfur cleared his throat awkwardly and stood about a tail-length away from her. She avoided his gaze, her jaw set and her eyes focused on the distance.

"Hey, Acorn... can we talk? It's important." There was a serious note hidden in his tone, yet she ignored the urgency and continued to glare off into the distance.

When a long moment of silence stretched between them, Strawfur let out a sigh.

"Please? You don't even have to say anything, just listen."

Reluctantly, she agreed with a curt nod of the head, unable to shake off the nagging curiosity about what he wanted to tell her. With a flick of his tail as a signal, Strawfur began to pad toward the entrance, and Acorndapple followed more slowly at his heel.

The pine trees swayed in the wind as the warm, evening air brought the tantalizing smells of crepuscular prey as they scurried around in the underbrush. Instinctively, she placed her paws on the needle-strewn ground more lightly in a hunter's form, even though hunting was the last thing on her mind. But she couldn't deny the enticing scents of the small animals and the way her stomach rumbled hungrily.

As she ducked under a low-hanging branch of a stout tree, weaving out of the way to avoid Strawfur, who had just rammed headfirst into a holly bush, she spotted an area where the undergrowth suddenly vanished. Her heart began to beat rapidly in her chest as she realized what the place was.

The clearing.

Her mind uncontrollably began to spin into a whirlpool of memories, some too painful for comfort. Shaking her head in an attempt to dislodge them, forcing back the haunting memory of Shell's eyes as she had revealed what she'd done, she raced ahead while Strawfur stared at her in confusion.

"Why are you going so far? We can just talk here!" he called.

"No! Let's go over here!" She said in a sharp tone, her paw slamming against a twig as she turned and ran farther into the forest, its splintery crack causing a nearby crow to let out a startled alarm cry and take off into the canopy.

The pounding of pawsteps hitting the ground behind her indicated that Strawfur was following as she ran farther and farther. For the first time in a while, she felt *free*. Her limbs ate up the ground effortlessly, each stride bringing her forward with ease. She felt like a kit again, racing against her littermates to reach the fresh-kill pile before them. But this time, she was winning, the problems behind her nothing more than a little nab.

"Slow down!"

She let out a sigh at the sound of her brother's gasping voice as he fought for breath. Grudgingly, she slackened her pace, legs burning

from the short burst of running. It didn't take long for Strawfur to catch up, his jaws agape to draw in deep gulps of air.

"Great StarClan, when did you ever start running so fast?" He gasped, still out of breath as the two of them slowed to a halt. Acorndapple just shrugged and glanced away, holding back a sigh.

From the corner of her eye, she could see Strawfur's tail tip begin to twitch. He even forced out a long sigh, causing her to snap her head back to his direction.

"You've been-"

"Avoiding you all? Yes, I have," Acorndapple burst out before Strawfur even had the chance to finish his sentence. She dug her claws into the ground as she felt feelings swelling rapidly inside her. A breakdown lingered threateningly close. Her throat burned, scorching inside her from the sting of emotions.

Strawfur stared at her in surprise at how bluntly she had responded.

"Is something wrong?" He finally asked.

He's oblivious. Her body quivered with anger, and she bit her tongue to hold back the yowl of frustration building in her chest.

Keep it together. Keep it together.

However, any bit of composure that once held her mind in place had completely vanished. She snapped her head forward and peeled her lips in a furious snarl, her fangs flashing in the orange hues of light. Strawfur let out a yelp of shock, backpedaling quickly as she drew closer.

"'*What's wrong?!*'" She mocked, spitting out the words. "I'll *tell* you what's wrong! Just imagine this: being accused in front of the whole clan, and your family just *listens*. They *refuse* to even defend you! What's the point of having kin when they'll betray you left and right?!"

"*I* didn't think you'd done something like that!" Strawfur protested. "And I'm sure Cherryspark didn't either. I was too shocked at the

moment to have a chance to say anything."

"You're 'sure' she didn't either?" Acorndapple let out a huff, still tense with anger. "Wow, where did the faith in *her* go, huh?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about," Strawfur said quickly, as if he were waiting for the opportunity. "She's been acting different lately."

Acorndapple just lashed her tail mutely. *Cherryspark has always had problems!*

Although she wanted to dismiss it, there was something else gleaming in his eyes. A note of uncertainty. *Fear*.

"She seems more irritable lately. Plus, it's like she's trying to avoid us and the rest of the family, too," Strawfur murmured, pulling his whiskers back along his cheeks.

So have I, but you're not that concerned about me, she thought testily, her tail still flicking.

You've acted like this before. Isn't it normal at this point? Her thoughts countered. *For Cherryspark, this is abnormal. Something is wrong.*

She forced herself to push away her pettiness, glancing at Strawfur again.

"Why do you think she's acting like this?" She asked stiffly, brushing away a few fronds of grass that were tickling her flank.

Strawfur began to pace restlessly, his blue eyes darkened, and his tail swinging side to side.

"It has something to do with Fernfur," he began, continuing to pace. "Their relationship seems... off. And it's not just him, it's Drystreak too. But I've mostly noticed this with her and Dad."

The mention of their father brought her back to a while ago, when she was on a patrol with both him and Cherryspark. Fernfur had dismissed the tabby she-cat as if she were just a nagging fly. He seemed irritated by her presence, and most prominently, outright

ignored her.

"He exclusively gives her the cold shoulder," Acorndapple pointed out after a moment. "But then again, *she's* been acting different lately, too. *She* could be the one splitting apart the family."

"There are times when she doesn't know how to keep her mouth shut," Strawfur agreed with a weary sigh. "Thanks to that, most of the family doesn't even *want* to be around her."

Acorndapple lashed her tail.

"*She's* the reason why Dad has been ignoring us lately. Neither of us is like her, though! Just because she acts utterly immature doesn't mean he should treat *us* like mouse-brains too," she snapped, beginning to hyperventilate.

"Then this is Cherryspark's fault," Strawfur concluded, halting in the middle of his pacing and letting out, yet again, another sigh. "We need to talk to her about this. I don't want the family to be completely split apart."

Acorndapple agreed with a tense nod as another thought entered her mind: *What if it's too late? They're already happy with their new litter. Do they really care about us anymore?*

A gut-wrenching feeling settled in her body as the thought was left unanswered. The two of them began to pad back to camp, drifting into deep thought. As they walked, she noticed that the sun was almost completely beneath the horizon, the sky a dark indigo splashed with warmer hues towards the bottom.

"We'll have to talk to her about it another time," Strawfur declared, quickening his pace. "Lakestar will be announcing the Gathering patrol soon. We can't miss it."

Silverpelt was almost completely visible as they bounded down the remainder of the trail that led to camp, both the stars and the full moon illuminating the tips of their fur to a soft silver glow. It didn't take long to find the entrance, and they quickly squeezed inside.

The timing was perfect as they skidded to a halt in the camp's

clearing. Lakestar was situated on the Shade Rock, only just finishing the ceremonial words to call the clan together. She stuck to Strawfur's flank as the two of them joined the crowd forming at the bottom of the boulder, craning their necks upwards to peer at the tall form of Lakestar.

"Where have *you* been?" Lakestar asked, her voice heavy with accusation as she pinned a glare directly at Acorndapple.

She flattened her ears, forcing back a growl creeping up the back of her throat. She had expected her to make some kind of comment anyway.

"Taking a walk with Strawfur," she answered in a flat voice.

Lakestar just let out a snort of disbelief before turning to address the rest of the clan. Acorndapple just continued to glare down at her paws, her mood somehow worse than before.

Ever since Shell accused me, it's like I can't do anything *without being questioned!*

The pale leader's voice broke her out of her thoughts as she began her announcement.

"Tonight is the night of the Gathering," Lakestar proclaimed as soon as the remainder of the clan settled down. "We haven't attended one in about two moons, and the last time we went, we were *ambushed*."

There were a few rumbling growls of anger and insults muttered about the rival clans. Acorndapple continued to watch stiffly, her tail lying still.

"However," Lakestar went on, pausing to add effect. "I still don't feel completely safe thanks to those *mouse-hearts*. We'll skip another Gathering tonight, I won't be taking that risk."

Although Acorndapple *had* expected Lakestar to skip out on another Gathering, she still felt oddly disappointed. It felt almost as if she was missing out on something, but she couldn't exactly place a claw on what it was.

She was waiting for Lakestar to dismiss the clan when she realized that the speckled she-cat had not finished. Instead, her gaze was focused on something behind the crowd of ShadowClan cats. Acorndapple followed her gaze, only to find that her gleaming cobalt eyes were situated on her younger siblings.

"It's time we strengthen ShadowClan and increase our ranks. You five, step forward," Lakestar called gruffly.

There were a few squeaks of surprise coming from her younger siblings. Clearly, they were not expecting to be made apprentices so early. It also seemed that Drystreak and Fernfur were not prepared either, lunging towards the five kits in a last-minute attempt to clean their pelts. After a few irritable meows of protest, Luckkit was able to wriggle free and bound towards the bottom of the boulder, followed by Amberkit, and then the rest of their siblings.

Acorndapple's ears were pricked as she watched the five younger cats stand restlessly beneath the Shade Rock, their paws shuffling and tails twitching.

There are only a few warriors. It's clear that at least one *of us, whether it's me, Strawfur, or Cherryspark, will end up mentoring one of them*.

Her heart skipped a beat at the thought. She could hardly sit still with excitement, her claws fidgeting on the ground. Although it had just been a silly thought, the idea of becoming deputy still gleamed like a shiny, unfamiliar object hidden in a clump of tall grass. If she had an apprentice, it would make it possible for her to become the deputy.

Would I ever be appointed as one, though? Lakestar completely lost her trust in me.

The thought sent a flash of irritation through her veins. She hunched her shoulders, glaring down at her paws.

"I know it's a little early for them to be made apprentices, but it's about time."

Lakestar's voice was surprisingly calm, despite her snappy

demeanor. She jerked her head upwards, focusing intently as the ceremony began to take place.

"Luckkit, Amberkit, Flurrykit, Firkit, and Prancekit, you have all *practically* reached the age of six moons, and it's time for you to be apprenticed. From this day on, until you receive your warrior names, you will be known as Luckpaw, Amberpaw, Flurrypaw, Firpaw, and Prancepaw."

The five kits sat up a little straighter, their eyes gleaming and their tail tips fidgeting.

"Firpaw."

The smoke-gray she-cat lifted her chin, copper eyes gleaming nervously.

"You will be trained communally by all of the mediators. Your training will officially start once you receive acceptance from every clan," Lakestar announced.

Firpaw dipped her head, her eyes twinkling. Instead of touching noses with her new mentors, she padded over to join the group of mediators.

"Luckpaw."

The golden-brown tabby's head shot up, his face ceasing into a huge grin the second his name was mentioned.

"Cherryspark is ready to take on an apprentice. I trust that she can train you to become the best warrior you can be."

Acorndapple had to turn her head to exchange looks with Strawfur just from how shocked she was. Cherryspark got *Luckpaw?* She would only teach him to become an even worse troublemaker than he already was.

Despite the previous sullen look on her tabby sister's face, a newfound excitement gleamed in her copper eyes. She bounded forward to touch noses with Luckpaw, her tail raised happily in the air.

As she watched, however, she noticed that some of the excitement had faded from Luckpaw's expression. Not only that, but several tail-lengths away, Fernfur had his lip curled, and he was staring down at his paws.

Interesting.

Next up was Amberpaw. Acorndapple hardly paid any attention to the ceremonial words as she was still focused on Fernfur's and Luckpaw's reactions. But her attention on the ceremony was regained a little too fast as soon as the name '*Shell*' was uttered. Her jaws fell slack with shock as the reddish-brown she-cat marched towards the Shade Rock to touch noses with Amberpaw, her chin lifted smugly.

Acorndapple had to bite her tongue to hold back the wave of anger and panic crashing over her. It was odd enough to feel both emotions at once.

Something like this was bound to happen anyways, she told herself, trying to stay calm by sinking her claws into the dirt.

Now, Lakestar's gaze was focused on Prancepaw. The golden-brown she-cat bounced on her paws, yet her twitching tail tip betrayed her nervousness.

"Prancepaw, your mentor will be Runningheart. He has received a good amount of training, and he is ready for his first apprentice."

Acorndapple could barely sit still any longer as the ginger tom padded over to touch noses with the smaller she-cat. There was only one apprentice left. Her chance of becoming a mentor was growing even slimmer by the moment.

"Flurrypaw."

The spotted she-cat's eyes gleamed as her name was finally called. Lakestar focused her cobalt gaze down on the long-furred kit, a sharp note lingering in it.

"Your mentor will be Strawfur. He is-"

Acorndapple flattened her ears, unable to listen any longer.

Of course both my littermates got apprentices before I did! Of course Shell did too! What did I even expect?!

Her eyes were still blazing with fury when suddenly, Strawfur halted in the middle of his tracks just as he was making his way over to Flurrypaw. Lakestar narrowed her eyes, staring down at him with confusion.

"I don't think I'm ready for an apprentice," he said bluntly. There were a few murmurs of surprise, and Lakestar looked even more irritated.

"*Excuse me*?" She hissed through gritted teeth. "Training an apprentice is an *honor*. You-"

"I know, I'm sorry," Strawfur quickly cut her off, before looking both embarrassed and guilty for interrupting the leader. "I just think it would be more fair for a different cat to train her, someone who *wants* to."

Strawfur glanced at Acorndapple expectantly. She was a little taken aback.

He thinks I should mentor her.

"I can do it," Acorndapple announced, taking a step forward. She stared confidently into Lakestar's eyes, her chin lifted and refusing to tear her gaze away.

Lakestar's expression immediately furrowed into a glare.

"Can you be *trusted?*" She interjected, the emphasis of the word 'trusted' holding a note of a sneer.

Acorndapple lashed her tail irritably as soon as she felt the burning, smug gaze of Shell on her pelt.

"Yes, I can," she snapped. "I'll train her well. There's no need to worry."

"Fine, just do *whatever* you want!" Lakestar's voice was almost a yowl as she leaped to her paws. "I never get a say here around here anyways! Even though I'm the *leader! Clan dismissed!"* Her words faded away as the spotted she-cat stormed into her den, her lashing tail vanishing around the corner.

Acorndapple glared after the pale leader for a long moment before starting towards Flurrypaw. But that was when she realized Strawfur was still lingering nearby, and she quickly turned to him.

"You didn't have to do that," she pointed out. "I know you wanted an apprentice."

"But... thank you anyways." She glanced down at her paws, hoping her words sounded as grateful as she felt.

"Yeah, of course, anything for my lil' sis. I know you wanted an apprentice. Couldn't have you upset," he meowed, headbutting her shoulder playfully. She looked up, sticking out her tongue at him.

"'*Lil' sis?*' *Excuse me?*" She rolled her eyes. "I don't wanna hear it, I was born a few seconds *before* you!"

"I don't know which mentor would've been better, but I'm glad either way!" Flurrypaw's voice caused both of them to turn their heads as she bounded over to them, her fluffy gray pelt prickling with excitement. She skidded to a halt and looked up at Acorndapple, her copper eyes gleaming.

"So, when will we start training?" She asked, her paws shuffling.

"Training won't start until tomorrow," she decided quickly. "But I want to take a tour of the territory tonight."

"Tonight?" Strawfur remarked. "Won't it be pretty difficult to tour the territory in the dark?"

"All the better," Acorndapple snapped, a little irritated that her ideas were being questioned. "She can learn to be a *true* ShadowClan cat. Come on, let's get going."

She didn't leave any more room for questions as she marched

towards the camp entrance. Flurrypaw quickly followed, their pelts soon fading in the inky-blackness of the forest.

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Chapter Thirty-One

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Her paws felt as if they were about to fall off. By the time she curled up in the intricately woven moss and pine needle padding of her nest, wrapping her scarred tail over her nose, she had already fallen into a deep slumber.

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Sunlight blazed from the hole in the den roof, pricking through her eyelids. She groaned, rolling over in her nest and sighing deeply. After a long moment of doing her utmost work to fall back asleep, her attempts proved to be futile, and she was forced to sit up in her nest with another sigh.

She blinked blearily, glancing around the den. Squinting as sunlight continued to sting her eyes, she began to notice that the den was practically empty. In fact, it *was* empty.

Great StarClan, how late is it?! I can't just let Flurrypaw sleep in like this!

She shot to her paws and rushed out of the entrance. As soon as she skidded to a halt in the clearing, she flattened her ears as she noticed that cats were already out and about on their regular duties. Taking a swift glance upwards, she noticed that the sun's position was awfully close to sun-high.

She's just my little sister, I'm sure she won't mind if I'm waking her up a bit later than normal, she tried to reassure herself as she padded briskly towards the apprentice's den, which was sheltered by a large holly bush. She poked her head through, blinking to adjust to the gloomy lighting. After a pause, she could make out Flurrypaw's sleeping form curled up in her nest. Before she could even utter a

sound to wake her, the gray she-cat's head rose, blinking blearily at her.

"Hi, Acorn! Was I supposed to sleep in?" She asked cheerily, just before breaking off in a yawn.

"No, but it's alright," she replied.

Should I have punished her for sleeping in? It was my fault anyway, but should I tell her so in the future she'll know?

She shook off the thought. It wasn't that big of a deal anyway, even though it was already sun-high. Plus, the two of them had spent all night trekking through the territory. Flurrypaw needed a good rest.

Acorndapple turned and began to head for the entrance of the camp. Flurrypaw quickly leaped to her paws and scampered after her. She stopped a tail-length short of the bramble-lined tunnel, turning to address her apprentice.

"We'll do a few lessons out in the forest," Acorndapple told her. *Hopefully, she won't ask me what the lessons are, because I haven't quite figured that out yet.*

"Okay!" Flurrypaw chirped, her copper eyes shining in the jubilant rays of sunshine. To her relief, she didn't bother to ask what the training was for; clearly, all that mattered to her was being out in the forest.

She flicked her tail, ready to stroll through the entrance. However, a sudden, prickling feeling shot up her spine. It was as if some sort of insect had attached itself to her back-rather, an imaginary one. She quickly turned, only to find that Pebblelily's gaze was boring into her.

Her stomach churned uneasily as she noticed that Pebblelily's face was upturned into some sort of anxious frown.

"Flurrypaw, I'll be back in a moment. Stay here."

Flurrypaw nodded as Acorndapple took off in the queen's direction, stopping a tail-length short. As soon as she reached her, Pebblelily

glanced down at the ground, avoiding her gaze and shifting her paws on the camp floor.

"Promise me you'll be safe," Pebblelily said, a trembling note lacing her voice just before Acorndapple could ask what was wrong.

"Yeah, why wouldn't I?" said Acorndapple, furrowing her brow. "But why-"

"Acorn, he's still out there. I *know* he is. He knows where I am. I can feel it in my bones." Pebblelily shuddered, her tail curling over her flank. "At night when I sleep, I can feel his gaze piercing through me."

Her eyes rounded as she gazed at Pebblelily. The queen's breathing hitched, growing ragged as if fog clotted her lungs, and her gaze drifted off absently into the distance.

"You don't know what he's capable of. If he knows you're alone in the forest, he could hurt *you*. I don't know what he wants from me anymore. Maybe he'll try to destroy you as revenge on me." Pebblelily's paws trembled, and her voice grew pleading. "So please, promise me you'll be careful."

"I promise," she said firmly, scraping her claws on the ground as an inner turmoil raged in her mind. When Pebblelily continued to stay silent, Acorndapple slowly rose to her paws before turning and heading over to Flurrypaw, who was watching the exchange with a tilted head. With a sharp signal of her tail, she strode to the entrance, Flurrypaw lagging at her heel.

As the two of them padded through the woods, Acorndapple's thoughts swam back to Pebblelily. Still, she was yet to find out who had fathered her kits: the cat responsible for the crushing stress and anxiety on the queen's shoulders.

The father to her kits was a treacherous cat; he was no better than a rogue by the sound of it.

She couldn't help but shudder at the thought of the unnamed cat making it to their camp. What disturbed her even more was the

thought of him hurting Pebblelily.

'At night when I sleep, I can feel his gaze piercing through me.'

Is she just paranoid? Or is her intuition right?

Another uncontrollable tremor ran down her spine. She shot a glance around the forest, eyeing the looming pine trees surrounding her from every side. Suddenly, they all seemed much too close. Their branches scraped against her pelt, needles tickling her skin. The sky vanished under its large canopy, darkness swooping in. Her breathing grew erratic, mind swimming with panic as the entirety of the forest closed in on her.

She halted, taking a moment to draw in deep gulps of air. Flurrypaw faltered in her step, brow furrowing with confusion as she gazed at her.

Get it together, she told herself, shaking out her pelt.

Continuing to pad through the trees, she led a quicker pace this time, with her apprentice walking hastily beside her. Eventually, her long strides seemed to take the edge off the fear, and her mind began to grow calm once more. She allowed her thoughts to drift, glancing over at Flurrypaw.

Part of her wished that her first apprentice wasn't her younger sibling. Somehow, the thrill of shaping a younger cat's path had been lost by the prospect of teaching a member of her own kin. Perhaps a portion of it was because they had both been raised by the same parents, so a lot of what Acorndapple might teach wouldn't be a whole lot different.

But, even then, seeing Flurrypaw's joy as she skipped along ahead of her brought back a tinge of the thrill. That was until she realized Flurrypaw was acting like a kit.

"Get back here or you'll scare off all the prey," she snapped, her voice slicing the air. Flurrypaw flinched, her ears flattening in response as she glanced over her shoulder guiltily.

Flurrypaw quickly scampered back, mumbling a small apology as

she did so. Acorndapple just flicked her tail dismissively, keeping her gaze pinpointed on the trail ahead of them as it cut through the looming pines. The small she-cat kept pace with her, though the previous energy hadn't faded away; she glanced eagerly side-to-side, taking in the abundance of daytime sights and smells.

As Acorndapple leaped over the sprawled out trunk of a fallen tree, while Flurrypaw scrambled over it due to her small size, the sudden flash of a butterfly's wings flickered in the corner of her eye. Before she could even register what had happened, Flurrypaw had leaped towards it, pouncing on empty air as it swiftly flitted away.

The back of her throat began to burn with exasperation as she stalked over to the spotted apprentice, glaring down at her disapprovingly.

"What are you, a *kit*?" She hissed through gritted teeth.

Flurrypaw took a step back, her eyes flaring up with shock. Then, she looked down at her paws sullenly, working her claws into the ground.

"Sorry. When I saw it, my first thought was to *pounce*." Flurrypaw then glanced up at her, round copper eyes sparkling with a tinge of mischief.

Acorndapple's first instinct was to chuckle in the pause after she spoke. Then, she mentally smacked herself.

Right now, she's your apprentice! *Not your sibling!*

"Well, don't do it again," she said quickly in a gruffer tone, glancing away. Her tail began to twitch with frustration.

She hadn't expected being a mentor to be this difficult-let alone training her own *sibling*. Every time Acorndapple scolded her, she couldn't help but feel a prick of guilt, or even an urge to laugh and lighten the mood, when that was exactly what she *shouldn't* do!

With the frustration further souring her mood, she trudged over to a tightly-clustered grove of trees, flicking her tail to beckon the young she-cat closer. Flurrypaw crept up beside her, tilting her head in

confusion.

A faint memory stirred in her mind of training with Beetlepelt long ago. She remembered when he had first taught her the technique of using the shadows to her advantage. With newfound excitement, she turned to the small gray she-cat quickly.

"See the shadows the trees make?" Acorndapple mewed, waving her tail towards the long dark shadows the cedars cast across the ground.

"I think all trees make shadows," Flurrypaw snickered.

She shot the gray she-cat a searing glance.

"Yes. Obviously," she meowed through gritted teeth, sinking her claws into the forest floor. "But if you look *closely* at them, you can see that you can use the shadows to your *advantage*, by keeping yourself hidden in them."

"Ooh, so like doing the stalking thingy? The one that Pigeonsilk always showed us?" Flurrypaw asked eagerly, lowering herself into the same form of a hunter's crouch.

"Precisely." Acorndapple couldn't help but admit that she was impressed by how quickly Flurrypaw had caught on to the form. Her legs were bent so low to the ground that her belly fur only barely brushed the forest floor, and her tail was kept level with her hock.

Acorndapple flicked her tail across Flurrypaw's dark gray ears.

"Keep them flat, they can make a silhouette," she ordered. Flurrypaw did so, tucking her ears over her head.

She nodded in satisfaction once the apprentice's body was perfectly sealed among the shadows. Her sister's sheen of long gray fur dappled with darker spots created the perfect coat to camouflage. Plus, her dark-colored eyes would stand out more dully in shadowed areas, making it so minimal light would glint off their surface.

Suddenly, the sharp *crack* of a branch echoed through the forest. Flurrypaw tensed beside her, while Acorndapple swung around, bushing out her pelt. Her heart had sprung into a race, to the point where it felt as if it would practically burst out of her chest.

As her claws unsheathed, eyeing the forest warily, realization began to dawn on her. Pebblelily was right; he *would* try to take revenge on her by hurting Acorndapple. But he would be outnumbered, at least, even if Flurrypaw didn't have any battle training whatsoever. If matters went awry, she could always send her back to camp to fetch help. There's nothing more dangerous than a crazed cat.

A few moments later, some of the undergrowth surrounding the area shivered. She crouched, hunching her shoulders and narrowing her gaze. But the last thing she expected slipped out from the trees: a brown-gold pelt, followed by a ginger one. She felt her tail slowly drop in a more relaxed position as she realized it was not, in fact, the insane cat that was hunting down Pebblelily. Instead, it was Cherryspark and Runningheart.

"Hey, Acorndapple," Runningheart said, his voice quiet but friendly. He approached her with Cherryspark and their two apprentices, Luckpaw and Prancepaw, in tow.

"Hello. Do you need something?" She eyed Cherryspark carefully from the corner of her eye. She had halted a distance away, leaving a large gap between her and Acorndapple. Plus, she completely avoided making eye contact, staring down at her paws.

She hadn't forgotten the silent conflict raging between her and Cherryspark, and the preparations she and Strawfur had made to have a confrontation with her. Until they decided to have the conversation, the silence would continue to grow the rift between them.

"We took Luckpaw and Prancepaw out on a tour of the territory earlier today, but decided to do some light hunting practice to wear them out. Then we came across you, and I was wondering if you wanted to join us, because I'm sure Flurrypaw would love to spend time with her siblings," Runningheart meowed, snapping her out of her thoughts.

Flurrypaw was eyeing her hopefully. After a moment, Acorndapple let out a sigh, nodding in agreement.

"Yeah, sounds good to me." Then, in a sharper voice, she added, "But clouds are starting to set in. It looks like rain is on the way, so we need to hurry."

Runningheart gave a quick glance upwards before giving a silent nod of agreement. Then, he turned to the three apprentices.

"Where do *you* think is a good place to go hunting?" He asked them.

The three of them tilted their heads thoughtfully.

"The carrionplace, of course. You said there were *tons* of rats there," said Luckpaw matter-of-factly.

"No, silly, remember how he said the carrionplace is *dangerous?*" Prancepaw mewed, purring with laughter.

"Oh, yeah, true I guess. At least *your* mentor tells you about that kind of stuff," Luckpaw sniffed, shooting a look at Cherryspark. The tabby she-cat visibly flinched, eyes rounding. Acorndapple watched the exchange with interest, leaning forward slightly.

"Okay, uhh that's enough," Runningheart chuckled nervously, glancing from Luckpaw to Cherryspark.

"Oh! You said the marsh has lots of prey. What about there?" Prancepaw quickly turned away from Luckpaw, eyeing her mentor.

"Or the forest area around it," Flurrypaw piped in.

"We should just stick to the woods, like Flurrypaw said, so they can learn some more basic hunting skills, since hunting in the marsh requires different techniques," Acorndapple cut in.

"Good idea," Runningheart said. "Then let's go."

As the six of them began to make their way to the hunting grounds, the forest was rather calm, unlike the usual bustling undergrowth alive with prey. Perhaps the gloomy light gradually setting in, with

clouds slowly unfurling themselves across the sky, had driven them down their burrows, chased away by the lack of sunshine. But they went along anyway, nostrils flared and ears pricked to detect any signs of prey.

Acorndapple felt almost as if she was intruding on the patrol. Runningheart and Cherryspark stuck at the head of the patrol, engaged in their own conversation in low voices, their pelts occasionally brushing against one another's fur as they walked. Behind her, the three apprentices were bunched together, chattering incessantly.

She tried to stay focus on her surroundings, ears stretched and swiveling to-and-fro alertly to pick up any abnormal sounds. As she walked, she tried to ignore the jab in her chest, focusing intently on the forest around her.

Truthfully, she was glad that Cherryspark was happy. Runningheart was a much better cat for her than Brookdaisy could ever be. Even then, she couldn't help but feel a prick of hurt. In a way, she felt oddly... replaced. But Cherryspark was happier now, why would she need a family that had only caused her more conflict than she already had? Such as the rift between her and Fernfur, the blatant dislike that Luckpaw held of her, and the silent issues raging between her, Acordapple, and Strawfur.

She doesn't need you or the rest of the family anymore. She found someone. She's happy now.

Acorndapple shook out her pelt, clamping down her fangs in frustration. She was acting *petty*. She should be happy for Cherryspark. It would only cause more problems to allow these negative feelings in. So she suppressed them, pushing them to the back of her mind. Just like she always did.

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Author's Note-

Hey there! Filler chapters are no fun, but luckily next chapter will be VERY interesting (if I can get it done on time). Speaking of

which, I'll be on vacation all of next week, so I'll be pretty inactive. I won't be getting back until next Sunday, so ummmm I'm not sure how the update schedule will work, but I'll figure it out!! Have a good day/night and remember to drink water!! <3

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Chapter Thirty-Two

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Tiny, sparse clouds dotted the stretch of night sky, slowly dissipating to reveal the vast forest of stars, gleaming together in Silverpelt's formation. The moon, perfectly spherical, gradually rose from its nest, illuminating a trail of light onto the camp. A full moon was upon them tonight. One that marked the first time ShadowClan had attended a Gathering in many moons.

Acorndapple was resting under the canopy of a small cedar at the edge of the clearing, the remains of a vole lying next to her. She swiped her tongue over her jaws, eyes slitted lazily as she was lulled to the edge of sleep. But excited voices caused her to lift an eyelid, peering at the camp through half-lidded eyes.

Her five younger siblings were clustered together near the fresh-kill pile, chatting incessantly. Luckpaw seemed to be telling his fellow littermates a story, his paws gesturing wildly and his mouth moving enthusiastically with the energy of the tale.

With a yawn, she rose to her paws, arching her back in a long stretch. Once finished, she began to pad over to the group of apprentices. Lakestar would be announcing the Gathering patrol at any heartbeat. It was more than likely that the younger cats would be attending, so Acorndapple had to be certain that her siblings knew how Gatherings worked.

A moon had passed since Acorndapple was first given her apprentice. The majority of the time since then was spent on battle training. Although they had done a few hunting practices here and there, it wasn't the sole focus; fighting would be a crucial skill to know amid a war.

"Imagine that the ThunderClan leader straight up *attacked* Lakestar!

And then there would be a whole fight! That would be awesome-"

"Hey, you five." Acorndapple cut off Luckpaw as she padded over to the cluster of apprentices. Luckpaw looked cross at being interrupted, letting out a small huff, yet swiveled his ears toward her anyway, while the other apprentices gazed at her expectantly.

"There's a good chance that you'll be on this Gathering patrol," she told them. Immediately, their tails stuck up in the air, eyes shining with excitement. She quickly went on. "Remember, don't let them know *any* of our secrets. Even if they already know about the tunnel."

"Yeah, we *know*," Amberpaw snapped, her long fur shooting up along her spine. Acorndapple almost visibly recoiled with surprise at her tone, glancing at the tabby. She met her gaze, contempt simmering in her golden eyes, as clear as daylight.

Her fur prickled uncomfortably. *It must be because Shell is training her. Who knows what she's been telling her about me? No wonder she seems to dislike me so much.*

She shook out her pelt as a burning flash of irritation scoured through her veins. Then, realization dawned on her. She was a *mentor*, of all cats. She couldn't let Amberpaw speak to her like that!

"Don't use that tone with me, you could've just said you already knew *nicely*. Was that really necessary?" It was almost impossible to keep the exasperation out of her voice as she glared at Amberpaw.

Amberpaw curled her lip, muttering something inaudible under her breath. The other apprentices gazed at her to Acorndapple, eyes round and a silence weighing the air.

Unable to take it any longer, she padded away briskly, not before letting out a long sigh. *Why is it so difficult to do anything without being put in a bad mood?*

Huffing, she sat down in the center of the clearing, tail swishing crossly. Nobody had begun to gather, but she was tired of waiting anyway.

As she was staring down at her paws with flattened ears, she felt the prick of a gaze penetrating through her. She glanced up, only to find that Lakestar was splayed out in a ray of moonlight, directly on the highest point on the clanrock, which she used for announcements. Her cobalt eyes were narrowed, unwavering as she met Acorndapple's gaze. She felt her heart sink in her chest.

Acorndapple had spent the past few moons doing her utmost work to avoid the pale gray leader. She hadn't exactly made her distrust of Acorndapple go unnoticed; she often shot her piercing glares and pointedly excluded her from patrols. Not to mention the blatant accusations in front of the entire clan.

It wasn't just Lakestar she was trying to avoid. Other cats, such as Honeypelt, seemed to blame her *directly* for the death of his sister, Sleetpath, since Acorndapple had apparently 'sided' with ThunderClan-according to Shell. So, in conclusion, it made *Acorndapple* responsible for Sleetpath's death. Even her own father, Fernfur, seemed to personally blame *her* for the entire war. Although the conflict with her dad wasn't exactly a recent issue.

"So, can I trust you at the Gathering tonight?" Lakestar's voice cut through her thoughts, causing her to glance up sharply, tail flaring with shock.

Her anger began to bubble through her veins, roaring in her ears. It was a boiling, searing beneath her pelt, like blazing flames licking through her body.

She didn't bother to respond. She simply glared at Lakestar, her muzzle sealed tightly.

Lakestar let out a derisive snort.

"Let all cats old enough to stalk in the shadows gather beneath Shade Rock!"

She barely noticed as cats began to gather around her, hot anger simmering in her stomach. She was hardly aware of Strawfur bounding over to her side, giving her a friendly nudge as a greeting.

"What's wrong, Acorn?" He asked when she didn't respond, brow furrowing with concern.

"*Nothing*," She muttered.

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A cool wind sprang from the north, whistling through the looming trees. It ruffled her pelt softly, brushing against the fur on the nape of her neck and the base of her tail. Its gentle stirring seemed to wash away the previous anger simmering through her, leaving room for a gnawing anxiety about the upcoming Gathering.

The patrol was practically silent. She could only pick up the light footfalls of cats around her. The apprentices picked up on the tradition of keeping silent on the walk to Fourtrees surprisingly fast. Even Luckpaw, who found it impossible to keep his mouth closed for more than five seconds, was staying quiet.

Flurrypaw stuck to her flank as they traveled. She seemed rather relaxed until the patrol entered the tunnel, where she cast wary glances around in the darkness. Acorndapple remembered when she was an apprentice, feeling just as nervous to tread through the tunnel. She remembered the eerie feeling of eyes watching her in the shadows. Only to find out that it had been Shell watching her the entire time, and the same *rogue* was here now, walking alongside the rest of the patrol. It would be her first time attending a Gathering. Acorndapple's whiskers twitched faintly, wondering how the other clans would react to her showing up.

Eventually, the large group of ShadowClanners reached the bottom of the slope that led up to Fourtrees. The path felt rather foreign. She couldn't even remember the last time she had attended a Gathering.

Her heart began to pick up pace when they reached the top of the slope. Lakestar's fur was bristling up as she stood at the front of the patrol, blocking the view of the clearing below. But from the loud murmurs droning through the air, it told her that it certainly wasn't empty of cats.

"Hey! Look who *finally* decided to show up!"

The murmuring in the clearing suddenly grew quiet. Acorndapple flattened her ears, knowing for a fact that mocking gazes were turning to stare at the arriving ShadowClan patrol. Lakestar's low snarl resonating in the air confirmed her suspicions.

This will be an interesting Gathering, she thought, just as Lakestar sprang off the top of the slope and raced into the throng of cats. The rest of the patrol followed suit, the silent spell that had held them quickly vanishing. She felt the sting of eyes following them as she streamed into the clearing, joining the sea of cats.

"Where are we supposed to go?" Flurrypaw asked, skidding to a halt and eyeing the other clans warily. "They don't look very friendly."

She was right. The other clans were shooting hostile looks at the arriving ShadowClan cats, most predominantly the ThunderClan and WindClan cats. She returned the looks, flattening her ears and gazing around with an equally antagonistic expression.

"Stick with your siblings and try to find other apprentices to talk with," she told her. Then, in a sharper tone, she added, "*Preferably* RiverClan apprentices."

Flurrypaw wrinkled her nose.

"Ew, don't they smell like fish?" She complained.

"It's either that or ThunderClan and WindClan, whom we're at war with," Acorndapple said with an eye roll.

"Yeah, I think I'll take RiverClan," Flurrypaw said with a dry snort of laughter, just before setting off to find her littermates. She watched her pad away, checking to make sure she made it through the crowd of cats without incident.

Acorndapple glanced away after a long moment, eyes scanning the crowd of cats. Now, where would *she* go? The only cats she'd ever spoken to at Gatherings were Sparrowlight and Copperleap, but those same two cats were the exact reason for her hatred of ThunderClan. Needless to say, she would be avoiding not only those

fox-hearts, but the entirety of ThunderClan itself.

Her gaze shifted over the throng with uncertainty. The only cat she could stick with was Strawfur, but his golden pelt was nowhere in sight. She let out a sigh of frustration. Where *was* he? The one time she needed him, he seemed to have completely vanished into thin air.

The furball is probably making dirt somewhere in the bushes, she thought with an eye roll.

Rather than standing out in the middle of the clearing like a lost duckling, she went and settled down behind a few RiverClan warriors. Although their long sheens of fur shone in the moonlight with seemingly no blemishes, they stunk heavily of fish. She screwed up her nose, biting back a gag, and attempting to focus on the Great Rock.

Lakestar was scooted the farthest away possible from the other leaders. Occasionally, she would cast Blazestar and Swiftstar a penetrating glare, only for them to offer a smirk in return.

"Do you think ThunderClan and WindClan have something to do with ShadowClan not showing up for a while?"

The voice of one of the RiverClan cats caught her attention away from the Great Rock. She pricked her ears, leaning forward subtly.

"Well, why else would all three clans be missing on that one Gathering a few moons ago?" Another cat said.

"Yeah, I guess. But why are *we* left out of it?" The cat beside them interjected.

"Otterstar wouldn't want-"

"Hey, Acorndapple."

She practically jumped out of her pelt. Turning around, ready to snap at Strawfur for sneaking up on her, she found that she was face-to-face with Copperleap.

The blood in her veins ran with a sudden flash of cold, shock faltering her heart in its step. The anxiety that had simmered in her stomach twisted into a knot, lurching nauseatingly. She quickly shook out her pelt, attempting to draw up the anger that seemed so hard for her to muster upon seeing him, strangely enough.

"Need something?" She snapped, before lowering her voice into a hiss. "If you're here to regurgitate more lies about 'not being a part of Sparrowlight's plans', then might as well walk away and not waste your time. I don't believe a *word* of any ThunderClan mange-pelt."

"Yeah, I didn't think you'd believe me." He offered a weak smile, which she returned with a furious scowl. She felt an intense anxiety, as if insects were swarming in her stomach. But she tried to cover it with anger, narrowing her eyes into a hard glare.

He flicked a bit of leaf litter off his pelt, smoothing down a ruffled spike of fur until his dark ginger pelt was completely flat, shining neatly in the dim silver lighting. He then glanced up at her, but she refused to meet his stare, holding back a huff.

"So, how have you been?" He blinked his hazel eyes at her innocently, a gaze that seemed so perfectly friendly, as if she were talking with any normal friend. She only grew more exasperated by the second.

He's acting like he never betrayed me!

"I think I'd better go before my clanmates *completely* lose their trust in me," she muttered, jerkily rising to her paws. She was about to turn and storm off to the other side of the clearing when Copperleap's voice stopped her.

"Wait, why wouldn't they trust you?" He had leaned forward, eyes swimming with a mixture of confusion and interest.

"Because of you and Sparrowlight, for StarClan's sake. They think I was friends with both of you and betrayed my entire clan on the night of the ambush."

"That's mouse-brained," he noted. "Especially because I had nothing to do with making the plans for the ambush. I only knew about it last minute when Blazestar told us, and even then, I tried to change his mind."

"Great, here comes the lies again," she said, the edge of a snarl marring her voice.

"But it's true!" Frustration had begun to sour his tone. "*Look*. If I were lying, then I'd be on the Great Rock with Sparrowlight."

"*What?*" She snapped her head around, glimpsing the looming boulder through the many forms of cats. She furrowed her brow with confusion. Only the four leaders stood at the top of the boulder. Except...

Her mind began to reel with confusion. There, seated a little ways below the leaders on the small rocky outcrop that marked the deputy's spot, sat a familiar brown tabby pelt. *Sparrowlight!* She was sitting directly next to ThunderClan's deputy, Thistlebriar, who would occasionally cast her a nasty glare.

"What in the name of StarClan is she doing with the other deputies? Are there *two* in ThunderClan now?"

"It's because she's been helping out with all the *lovely* plan-making with Blazestar and Swiftstar," Copperleap answered sourly.

Acorndapple quickly glanced back at him.

"Wait, so how do I know *you're* not trying to pry information from me to tell Blazestar and Sparrowlight?" She accused.

"*Because I'm not!* If you'd just *think* for a moment, you'd see that I just wanted to talk to you." His eyes were now glimmering with a note of hurt in them.

Acorndapple shifted her paws uncomfortably. Her first thought was to respond with another accusation, but she began to realize that it certainly wouldn't make things any better, seeing his downcast look. Uncertain of what to say, she clamped her muzzle shut, staring at him wordlessly.

Copperleap began to speak again, although this time, his voice was completely deflated.

"I just wish-"

"Hey, what's going on here?"

She almost didn't recognize the voice as she glanced over, only to realize it was her own clanmate, Brownsnout. She had hardly ever spoken to him before, which made her even more confused as to why he was walking into the middle of a conversation. Or, more like an *argument*.

"Great, now I suppose we need a mediator?" Copperleap said, his voice growing increasingly frustrated as he glanced over at Brownsnout.

"Whether or not I'm a mediator, I just figured you ought to go find some of your ThunderClan friends to speak with instead, seeing ShadowClan and ThunderClan aren't exactly on good terms," he said drily, his voice curt.

Copperleap's tail flared up, ears lying flat over his head. He glanced at Acorndapple, as if expecting some sort of backup. But when she avoided his stare, looking at Brownsnout instead, he let out a low sigh before rising to his paws and trudging off into the crowd.

She blinked rapidly, still trying to process the entire situation. When she finally opened her jaws to say something, Brownsnout had already turned away and left, heading for the Great Rock.

"May the Gathering begin!" Blazestar's loud and commanding voice shook through the clearing, causing her to jump. She quickly shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts, before hurriedly settling down beneath a small hawthorn bush, attempting to focus on the leaders.

Otterstar went first, blinking calmly at the other leaders before stepping to the very front. Her amber gaze was gentle as she addressed the crowd.

"RiverClan does not have much to report, other than we are as

strong and healthy as ever, especially now that our river is overflowing with salmon," she announced. Her voice was quiet, but strong enough to sweep through the gathered cats. "I pray to StarClan that no conflict reaches our territory, as my clan is currently in its most peaceful state."

She could recognize the veiled warning in her tone. RiverClan did not want the war to be dragged to their borders, as it seemed.

"Thank you, Otterstar!" Blazestar said cheerfully. Acorndapple narrowed her gaze. The ThunderClan leader was acting strangely energetic.

"Well, someone must've eaten sunshine and rainbows before the Gathering, huh?" Lakestar snarked.

Blazestar swung his head towards her, muzzle curling into a grin.

"Oh, you know, I'm just happy that ShadowClan *finally* decided to show up for once," he said, his voice disgustingly sing-songy. "I mean, it's like a *reunion* to see you here again, Lakestar! Now, I wonder what's been keeping your clan cooped up for so long, eh?"

"I wonder," Lakestar snarled, rising to her paws. Her pale gray pelt was bristling along her spine, tinged silver in the moonlight. Her cobalt eyes flashed, as if she were preparing to launch herself at the golden tom at any given second. Yet somehow, she restrained herself.

Blazestar waved his tail, turning attention towards him.

"Tonight, let's not concern ourselves with the usual Gathering chit-chat. Swiftstar and I have an important announcement to make, as well as a proposal." He cast a glance at Lakestar at his last words, which she returned with a narrowed gaze.

"Why can't Swifstar speak for himself?" Some cat yowled from within the ranks.

Swifstar shifted uncomfortably from where he was sitting, wrapping his tail over his paws.

"Blazestar can take over for me," he rasped, just before breaking off into a fit of coughing.

Hmph. He seems rather frail.

This did not go unnoticed by the warriors in the clearing. Faint whispers hummed in the air, cats glancing at one another with hidden expressions.

Blazestar cleared his throat awkwardly.

"Lakestar, we would like to offer you a proposal," Blazestar repeated, his voice smoother this time and dripping with honey. Lakestar stuck her muzzle up haughtily in the air, clearly disdainful of whatever words were to come out of his mouth. Yet her ears were swiveled in his direction, as if still interested in hearing what he had to say.

"He acts like everyone is head over heels for him," one of the RiverClan warriors muttered quietly, although just loud enough for Acorndapple to pick up. She twitched her whiskers, silently agreeing as she glared up at the looming figure of the golden tabby.

"Not only have WindClan and I discussed this, but the majority of our proposal was thought up by one of my most trusted warriors, Sparrowlight." He nodded down to the pale brown tabby, who in turn, puffed out her chest pridefully, doe-brown eyes shining with the reflection of moonlight. Near her, the other deputies shifted awkwardly, while Thistlebriar shot her a dirty look, lip curled and fangs flashing in the low light.

So, because she's been involved with all of Blazestar's scheming, she gets to sit with the other deputies?! This is mouse-brained! They don't even seem to want *her there!*

"Then what is she, a deputy or something? Because ThunderClan already has one," hissed a cat nearby, presumably a RiverClanner. Their companions voiced their complaints, while more muttering swept through the crowd.

"Ah, I see, so you've lost the ability to think for yourself that you

have to turn to your pitiful warriors to do your bidding?" Lakestar reprimanded with a sneer. Her cobalt gaze slid through the crowd, over to Acorndapple. Most likely, she was trying to seek her out in the crowd in some kind of sick way to see her reaction to the mention of Sparrowlight. Clearly, she remembered how Acorndapple had confessed that she had been friends with the ThunderClan tabby, and in turn had been betrayed by her. Instead of meeting her cobalt gaze, she frowned down at her paws, refusing to give her any more of a reaction.

"Allow me to get to the point," Blazestar said, ignoring her insult and waving his tail hurriedly, glancing upwards at the position of the moon. "We've decided that we cannot have such an *atrocious* clan at our border, one that is so ungrateful for having such abundant land, so much that they hardly *hunt* on it! So, keeping both the needs of my clan and WindClan's in mind, we will give you a decision: Give us a third of ShadowClan's land, and the war will end. Or you can go the harder route and fight to not give it up. Either way, we *will* be taking the territory."

Lakestar's eyes flashed with fury.

"So I'm starting to understand now!" She exploded, her tail whipping back and forth furiously. "Poor old starving WindClan has guilt-tripped you into getting ShadowClan to give up some land because the frog-brains can't handle what they already have! And *greedy* Blazestar is willing to help because he can't stop his power-trip on getting as much territory as possible when he already has *plenty!*"

Lakestar looked as if she were moments away from launching herself at the tom. But Blazestar just continued to sit in a still position, blinking calmly as if he wasn't phased at *all* by her wrath.

"Remember, we are kind enough to give you a choice on what to do. Of course, we will *still* be coming to take the territory, whether it's with force or not. You can choose to end this war peacefully, or to drive it on and cause more destruction in the long run," Blazestar said with a sly edge to his tone.

"Oh, you *are* very kind for leaving me with this choice," Lakestar

huffed, her brow furrowed and her fur prickling, clearly conflicted. "I would like to say that I'm rather confused why you're still calling this a 'war' when only little border scraps have occurred and *barely* two *real* battles. But whatever, call this what you want, because I've been waiting for *moons* for you to quit sitting around and munching on mice."

"I don't have all night, Lakestar," Blazestar said curtly, while the other leaders peered at the two of them, leaning forward with pricked ears.

"Don't throw a proposal at me and expect me to make a decision quickly!" Lakestar snapped loudly. "How about this: Give me *three* moons to make a decision. Which is until the end of Leaf-fall."

Three moons? Acorndapple thought with a shake of the head. *Great StarClan, who needs that much time just to figure something like* that *out?*

She had expected Blazestar to launch some sort of argument on Lakestar about how it was an 'awfully long time,' but instead, he accepted with a dip of the head.

"Very well. In three moons time, we will set the new markers on your territory. You can choose to stop us, or to allow us to continue without conflict," Blazestar concluded.

"*Very well*," Lakestar responded mockingly.

"We're done here! ThunderClan, let's leave!" Blazestar yowled, springing to his paws. He muttered something inaudible to Swiftstar before turning and leaping off the Great Rock. With that, another Gathering had ended, one that brought more conflict than it had resolved.

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Chapter Thirty-Three

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It had only been a day since the Gathering, and the idea of a potential battle in the coming moons was all the clan could talk about. Lakestar hadn't announced anything to the clan directly about her decision whether she should let ThunderClan and WindClan take the territory or engage in a fight to defend it. But silently, Acorndapple had a gnawing feeling that she would choose the latter, knowing Lakestar's tendency to jump to aggression.

Now, Acorndapple was basking in a pool of sunlight, watching her younger siblings bicker about the potential fight.

"Battles only cause injuries and *deaths*. I think it's better to just peacefully argue it out," Firpaw said calmly, the mediator-apprentice swishing her tail across the dirt.

"But they're necessary sometimes. Besides, not everything can just be argued," Flurrypaw pointed out.

"You two are *so* boring. Battles are way more fun!" Luckpaw announced loudly.

"You haven't even *been* in a battle, frog-brain," Prancepaw quipped.

"Then why are we arguing about it?" Luckpaw shot back, squaring up to her. However, he didn't look nearly as threatening as a real warrior; it was plain sibling fighting.

"Because it's fun!" Prancepaw then proceeded to lunge at the tom, bowling over the tabby easily, given the upper hand of surprise. Luckpaw let out a furious yowl of shock before the two of them were sent into a hissing ball of fighting, practically tumbling into Amberpaw. The golden tabby let out a snarl of annoyance, swiping

fitfully at the two apprentices before retreating back a step, while a few tail-lengths away, Firpaw and Flurrypaw watched the chaos unfold. Firpaw's gaze was narrowed critically, while Flurrypaw giggled with sparkling copper eyes.

Acorndapple shook her ears, letting out a quiet chuckle at their bantering. She remembered when she was an apprentice herself, arguing with both her littermates about the prospect of battle. She couldn't forget the gripping anxiety leading up to a battle many moons ago, to the point where she could barely focus on her own training. Cherryspark—Cherry*paw* at the time—had been overly eager to fight in one, while Acorndapple had a *very* different opinion.

She let out a low sigh, resting her muzzle on her paws as the light of midday sunshine blazed down on her pelt, stinging her eyes slightly. Even though her body was basking comfortably in the toasty warmth of the sunlight, her fur began to prickle as anxious thoughts swept through her mind.

The thought of her littermate sent her back to her and Strawfur's plan of confronting Cherryspark. But, by now, the plan seemed... out of reach. It had been over a moon since she and her brother had talked about it, and Cherryspark had grown even more distant from the two of them. Acorndapple couldn't even remember the last time she had spoken to them! The golden-brown tabby was impassive half the time, as if any bit of emotion was drained from her face. Not only that, but she was *quiet*. Such an unsettling quiet, especially for Cherryspark, that sent the fur along her spine shooting up uncomfortably. Acorndapple wanted so *desperately* to know what had happened to her once energetic sister, the one whose spirit seemed unbreakable.

She shook out her pelt, exhaling a heavy sigh.

But I do *know, and it's because she was driving a rift through the family. Now she's suffering the consequences of her own actions*.

The sudden longing for her old family came crashing back like a wave. She missed her, Cherryspark, and Strawfur's seemingly unbreakable bond, the comfort of her mom and dad's protective

embrace, and the overall close-knit family. And, as much as she hated to admit it, she missed whenever her, Strawfur, and Cherryspark were Drystreak's and Fernfur's only kits. Now, Fernfur spent *all* of his undivided love and attention on Luckpaw, blatantly ignoring Acorndapple and her littermates, while Drystreak either spent her time quietly doing warrior duties or devoting her energy to spending time with Acorndapple's younger siblings or briefly conversing with Acorndapple or Strawfur.

She still held tight to the belief that the lack of time Fernfur spent with her and her littermates was because he thought they were failures.

Thanks to Cherryspark, and all because of her senseless behavior. All it does is drive Dad away from us because he thinks Strawfur and I act the same way.

It was as if her thoughts were repeating the conversation she'd had with Strawfur over a moon ago— except she was growing more irritated as every problem seemed to circle back to Cherryspark in some kind of way.

She shook out her pelt roughly, trying to drive away the negative thoughts obstructing her mind. She rose to her paws, taking a quick glance upwards. Sun-high was far from over, but falling asleep for her usual midday nap seemed just as possible as a hedgehog sprouting wings and learning to fly.

With a sigh, she glanced over at the apprentices. They looked as if resting was the last thing on their minds as well. Luckpaw and Prancepaw were slowly circling each other, their pelts clumped and messy from their tussle earlier. Now, they seemed more battle-locked, eyeing each other with intense gazes as if calculating who would land the first move. However, Prancepaw looked as if she was physically unable to take the spar seriously because her eyes were sparkling with amusement, and her whiskers were occasionally twitching.

At the edge of their fighting circle, Amberpaw, Flurrypaw, and Firpaw watched them intently. Amberpaw was quietly chanting out Luckpaw's name, while Flurrypaw stood with unwavering support

for Prancepaw. Firpaw, on the other hand, watched the entire ordeal with a disapproving look on her face. However, her softly glowing copper eyes betrayed her excitement.

Luckpaw was the first to start. For a fraction of a second, his muscles tensed beneath his pelt. Then, he lunged forward wildly, his legs outstretched. Prancepaw, although her reflexes were rather quick, wasn't fast enough to dodge his onslaught. He bowled into her, sending her reeling backwards into the dirt. She didn't have enough time to regain her balance before Luckpaw gave her a hefty shove, pushing her straight onto the ground.

"And, Luckpaw wins!" Amberpaw announced smugly. "No supper for you, Flurrypaw, and more for me!"

"Who said I was supporting Prancepaw?" She shot back. "This bet is so stupid—"

All of a sudden, Prancepaw let out a low growl. Luckpaw, who was still standing on top of her with his paws fastened on her shoulders, was clearly not paying attention. The golden-brown she-cat shoved her paws forcefully upwards, knocking Luckpaw backwards. The tom let out a snarl of outrage at the sudden trick, while Prancepaw was given enough time to scramble out beneath him. She didn't bother loitering around before springing at Luckpaw. He let out a gasp of something mingled between shock and pain as her paws found purchase on his flank, the momentum giving her enough force to send him tumbling to the ground.

"Let's go, Prancepaw!" Flurrypaw yowled, her tail swishing.

"You just said you weren't supporting Prancepaw anymore!" Amberpaw growled, narrowing her eyes at the spotted she-cat.

"When did I say that?" Flurrypaw asked innocently, blinking at the she-cat.

Acorndapple focused her attention back on the spar as Luckpaw reached his paws upwards to drag Prancepaw down with him, bringing the two into a roll. She batted fiercely at his stomach with sheathed claws, while he boxed her ears, growls and snarls cutting

through the air. With both of his paws occupied 'clawing' up Prancepaw's ears, she focused on kicking his stomach fiercely, emitting an "*Ooof!*" from him. The move distracted him momentarily, allowing Prancepaw to quickly slip out from beneath him.

Luckpaw didn't give her the chance to pounce on him as he quickly scrambled to his paws, facing her once again. The two of them slowly circled each other, their pelts bushed out and eyes never moving from one another.

Luckpaw was the first to make a move.

He sprang at her, plummeting straight for the golden-brown apprentice. But Prancepaw, clearly remembering what had happened last time, quickly side-stepped, allowing him to sail past her, crashing...

Directly into Honeypelt.

Flinching, Acorndapple looked away as soon as she heard his snarl of outrage when Luckpaw landed on him. She glanced over slightly, her heart dropping in her chest at the furious look written on the silver-and-white tom's face, while Luckpaw cowered against the ground, looking overly apologetic as the long-furred warrior towered over him. The other apprentices watched them, wide-eyed.

"Learn to mind other cats around you when you're goofing off!" Honeypelt's voice was nearly a shout, his lip curled into an ugly growl.

Acorndapple scrambled to her paws and quickly hurried over to them.

"He's just an apprentice. He didn't mean any harm. He's sorry about it too," Acorndapple snapped, nudging Luckpaw to his paws before facing the tom with a fluffed out pelt.

"You're a mentor, are you not?! It's *your* responsibility to control them!" Honeypelt hissed, directing his piercing golden glare onto Acorndapple. "But you know what: I don't expect any less from a cat

that had no problem betraying the entire clan to ThunderClan, *and* getting Sleetpath killed."

Acorndapple's eyes rounded at the accusation. Oddly enough, though, anger didn't come as quickly as expected. Honeypelt's dislike of her was as clear as daylight, and the raw grief from his sister's death still hovered over him. She'd expected him to make some kind of accusation anyway.

But even then, the apprentices were watching the entire exchange, and if she didn't defend herself, then they would most likely believe his accusations were true. She ground her fangs together, straightening herself and refusing to back down against his angry glare.

"I never 'betrayed' the entire clan to ThunderClan. Yes, things happened between me and another warrior from the clan, but I didn't outright do anything to harm ShadowClan! Plus, this was *moons* after Sleetpath had died, so you have no right to blame me!"

Acorndapple whipped around, prepared to storm off. But her ears twitched as she caught a sentence slip out from Honeypelt's jaws.

"How defensive you're getting proves otherwise," he sneered in a low voice.

She stalked away, her tail lashing to and fro. The sting of fury simmering in her throat dulled down to a heavy feeling of embarrassment in her stomach, only fueled upon seeing the five apprentices staring at her, eyes as round as an owl's. Firpaw quickly excused herself to see her mentors, the fur along her spine raised. Acorndapple watched the smoke-gray she-cat pad away, ears lying flat against her head. She then glanced up as she noticed that Firpaw's mentors, Goldennewt and Brownsnout, were not far off, certainly within earshot of the entire argument.

Upon seeing Brownsnout's familiar splotched pelt, her thoughts swam back to the previous night at the Gathering. The gnawing embarrassment in her stomach turned into full-force fangs sinking into her pelt. How much had he overheard of her and Honeypelt's argument? The tom had accused her of betraying ShadowClan to

help ThunderClan, and Acorndapple had indeed talked with a ThunderClan cat at the Gathering last night, which Brownsnout had witnessed with his very own eyes. He must've thought it was utterly mouse-brained for her to even be speaking with Copperleap when it was only adding more fuel to the fire. Did he think she was betraying the clan even more? But even then, he came to her aid...

Abruptly, Brownsnout glanced up, as if sensing her gaze boring absently into his pelt. His emerald eyes met her sun-lit ones, causing her to look away quickly, stomach twisting. Suddenly, she felt self-conscious, quickly smoothing down a clump of fur on her shoulder. She shook out her pelt, awkwardly rising to her paws and jerkily turning before padding back over to the apprentices, trying to push back an overwhelming surge of embarrassment.

"How about we all go on a hunting trip to wear off that energy," she muttered absently. "You can go get your mentors. I'll bring Goldpelt to lead us."

They nodded silently, still looking too shaken to say anything. She heaved a sigh, wishing she hadn't stepped in for Luckpaw and ruined the whole mood by having a spat with Honeypelt.

Well, I guess it's inevitable for me to get into arguments, since I'm always *in one half the time, so there's no point dwelling over it*, she thought, flicking her ear as if she were dismissing the embarrassment.

As the apprentices split off to look for their mentors around the clearing, while Flurrypaw lingered awkwardly nearby, she maneuvered her eyes around the camp, searching for the deputy. It didn't take long to find him; he was tearing ravenously into a crow near the clanrock. She quickly headed over to him, kinking her tail over her back in an indication for Flurrypaw to follow.

"Goldpelt." She said his name quietly as a greeting, approaching the fluffy gray tom. He glanced up, giving her a polite nod. Out of the majority of the cats in the clan, the deputy was one of the few cats she was more warm to, due to the fact that he had defended her during Shell's confrontation.

"I wanted to help wear off the apprentices' energy. I know it's sun-high, but I'm not sure if it's doing the rest of the clan any good if they're having spars in the clearing," she said. Goldpelt nodded in understanding.

"We're all going on a hunting trip together. The apprentices are gathering up the mentors. Do you mind if you lead it?" She added.

"I don't mind at all. Sun-high will be over soon, and I've been needing to get out of camp and get some fresh air anyway."

Acorndapple, Flurrypaw, and Goldpelt waited for the three apprentices to finish gathering up their mentors. She stiffened as they approached, avoiding looking at them entirely. Her younger siblings' mentors were notorious for being cats that she would much rather avoid. Runningheart wasn't bad at all, but he and Cherryspark were tied at the tail, and her sister was *most definitely* a cat that she was trying to steer clear of.

"Goldpelt! Are you coming along too?" Shell's irritating voice drowned out her senses as the red-brown she-cat padded over to them. Acorndapple ground her teeth together, fighting back every urge to claw off the smug expression on the she-cat's face. She sighed, silently regretting coming up with the idea of a hunting trip at all.

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Acorndapple tail-tip twitched incessantly as annoyance pooled over her, like honey soaking through her pelt. The 'hunting' patrol was *huge*. With all four mentors, as well as Goldpelt, plus the apprentices, it made for an astonishing *nine* cats on the patrol. Just for hunting! ShadowClan may be the stealthiest clan out of the other clans, but it seemed rather absurd for a group this large to catch *anything*, even if their stalking skills were heightened. She began to wonder if battle training would have been a better idea, and clearly, she was not the only cat with this in mind.

"It would be a tactical move if Lakestar were to ambush Blazestar and his warriors as they were marking the new borders." Shell's overly-confident voice droned in her ears as the red-brown she-cat

matched her pace with Goldpelt, his ears swiveled in her direction as he listened to her yammer on about idiotic ideas she had regurgitated from her *not-so-large mind.*

She glowered at the back of Shell's pelt, her eyes narrowed as cold fury seeped into her chest, bubbling in her veins. She had been capable of avoiding patrolling with the insufferable she-cat for several moons, but today was just her luck. Being within the mere *proximity* of the she-cat reminded her of all those horrible, gut-wrenching feelings building inside her, gradually growing larger and larger. Her claws sank into the dirt, wanting so desperately to lash out. She could almost imagine the feeling of her claws slicing through skin, blood pooling around her, and instead of the hauntingly familiar black-and-white pelt lying lifelessly on the ground, it was a red-brown pelt instead, yellow eyes glazed over just like before...

She shook her head fiercely, almost shocking herself. The lurching, *disgustingly* horrifying blood lust brought by the overwhelming siege of anger sent a crawling feeling up her spine. It felt as if she were looking at herself from a different perspective, like she was someone she couldn't even *recognize*. How could she even have such malicious thoughts? Was she truly no better than a rogue?

A deep, gut-wrenching disgust twisted her stomach into a knot, a freezing cold pressing against either side. What was she thinking? What would *other* cats think of her having such detrimental feelings? Ones that seemed to have spawned from somewhere no better than the Dark Forest?

This is why feelings must be concealed, so no cat will ever be harmed by them. Then the negative energy can't escape— and it can't spread any further.

She pulled herself out of her mind, shaking her head in an attempt to clear the pressing thoughts. The patrol was still chatting amongst themselves. Cherryspark and Runningheart padded together, occasionally swapping warm glances and their pelts brushing side-by-side. She quickly looked away and glanced at the rest of the patrol, flattening one ear awkwardly, like she had intruded on a private moment. Goldpelt and Shell were still in the lead, with the

reddish-brown she-cat talking continuously, although her voice had faded to the back of Acorndapple's mind. On the other hand, the four apprentices were chatting quietly, bunched together on the left flank of the patrol.

She parted her jaws, drawing scents over her tongue. A hint of the warm tang of Leaf-fall washed over her, the first prick of the season. Drinking in more smells, she could make out the enticing scent of a squirrel. However, it was faint, clearly somewhere much farther in the forest. She suppressed a sigh of frustration. The patrol seemed more focused on chit-chat rather than hunting, driving any of the prey that was within hunting distance right into their burrows.

"...Chervil would be helpful, although I haven't seen a whole lot of patches lately. I know a couple of raspberry bushes. Their leaves can help simmer down the pain..."

Acorndapple's ears twitched, turning her head in the direction of the noise. Shrikestripe was hurrying along through the woods, her emerald eyes dark with concentration. Pigeonsilk was in tow, clearly aiding the medicine cat in her herb-gathering expedition.

"Is everything alright, Shrikestripe?" Goldpelt called, his brow furrowed as he glanced over at the medicine cat. The patrol faltered in its step, staring at the long-furred she-cat.

"Yes, of course. Pebblelily is kitting, and we needed to find something to help with the pain," Shrikestripe answered back, the normally soft-toned medicine cat's voice now curt with anxiety.

Acorndapple's tail flared up with shock.

"Could I go back to camp and see how she's doing?" She asked urgently, the question partially to Goldpelt as well as to Shrikestripe.

"Just don't crowd her!" Shrikestripe called, vanishing into the woods, while Goldpelt gave a nod of approval.

"Oh, and Goldpelt, can you watch over Flurrypaw for me while I'm gone?" She asked, skidded to a halt just after starting a sprint back

to camp.

"Yes!" Goldpelt answered back as a shout due to his proximity.

With a sigh of relief, she turned and took off into the trees, suddenly overcome by worry. If Shrikestripe was out collecting herbs for her pain, then it must be serious.

Pebbelily is far too young to be having kits.

The thought sent a shudder of disgust through her spine, grinding her teeth together as she wondered, yet again, who was the tom responsible for the queen's misery.

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Chasingfur was in the nursery with Pebblelily, who had ordered Acorndapple to stay outside the den so the gray she-cat wouldn't be crowded. Although she was annoyed with being ordered around after sprinting back to camp just to see her, she was also slightly grateful; hearing her low, pained yowls made her feel a tad bit queasy.

She wasn't sure how long she had waited outside the den. The sun had eventually dropped below the towering cedar at the edge of camp, a tinge of pink spreading towards the horizon as it slowly made its way downwards. At one point, Shrikestripe and Pigeonsilk had returned, with a bundle of raspberry leaves clutched in each of their jaws. Pigeonsilk was ordered to bring the excess back to the medicine cat's den, while Shrikestripe brought a suitable dosage for Pebblelily, who had by then quieted down.

"Do you think she's okay?"

Acorndapple practically jumped out of her pelt at Strawfur's sudden approach. She quickly shook out her pelt, calming her racing heart.

"I'm not sure. Chasingfur and Shrikestripe haven't reported anything. Pebblelily has been quiet now, but I'm not sure if that's a good sign or a bad sign..." Then with a dry snort of bitter humor, she added, "Plus, I wouldn't know anyway, it's not like I've ever had kits before."

"I wouldn't know either," Strawfur said with a nod of understanding.

"Oh, *really,* Strawfur?" She rolled her eyes.

"Yeah... it may come as a surprise... but I'm not planning on having kits anytime soon." His eyes glimmered with amusement. "I don't think I'd be a very good mom."

"That's a shame to hear, Strawfur, because I'm sure you would've been a good one," she said, her voice sarcastically downcast.

The mood turned solemn once more as she focused her attention on the medicine's den, tail-tip flicking with anxiety-induced impatience. She longed for one of the medicine cats to come outside with at least *some* sort of news, whether it was good or bad.

Eventually, Strawfur rose to his paws, muttering that he was going to grab something to eat. As she was silently debating whether or not she should take a peek inside and check on Pebblelily's condition herself, her wish was suddenly answered. Shrikestripe padded out of the den, her plumy tail trailing behind her. However, Acorndapple felt her heart immediately sink in her chest as she noticed her emerald eyes were gazing down at her paws with regret.

"Any news?" She asked, gazing up at the medicine cat anxiously. She took in her expression, feeling a slight bit of panic start to set in.

"One of the kits didn't make it," she said, her voice low and weary. "A little tomkit. There are two healthy kits, both she-kits. It seems there's another kit on the way."

She dipped her head, gnawing her tongue as her gaze fell to her paws. The tragic death of one of the kits somehow did not surprise her. It was a miracle, at least, that two of them had survived, and another one was expected. She quickly glanced up just as Shrikestripe had started to make her way to the medicine cat's den.

"Could I go see her, if that's alright?" She called.

"You'll have to check with Chasingfur and see if you can."

Shrikestripe's voice was quieter than normal. A heavy weight of sadness gripped her tone, and her head and tail were hanging low.

A stillbirth is horribly tragic and unfair. StarClan is needlessly cruel for ripping away the life of a cat so early. It's just pointless.

She glanced back at Shrikestripe.

Does she blame herself for the death? It seems to have affected her a lot.

Acorndapple furrowed her brow, thinking back to the expression on the gray she-cat's face. It seemed as if there was much more to it, deeper thoughts that she could not read just from a single look. With a helpless shrug, she turned back towards the entrance before poking her head inside the den.

Chasingfur was blocking a good portion of the entrance of the den, making it impossible to see over his thick ginger pelt. But by the way his posture was relaxed and his chin was lifted, it seemed as if the rest of the birth had gone smoothly.

"Hey, Chasingfur, may I see her?" She asked, her tone soft but polite.

"As long as you give her some space," he said gruffly. "She's about to rest."

He stepped aside, allowing her to brush past him. A surge of relief swelled through her at the sight of her lying down peacefully, eyes half-lidded with three healthy kits kneading against her flank. She tried to avoid her eyes straying over to the tiny, still slate-gray body lying at the edge of the nest, its flanks utterly motionless.

Stifling a shudder, she turned back to Pebblelily, glancing down at the three kits. The queen blinked up at Acorndapple in a weary greeting, her heather-blue eyes dark with exhaustion. But as she glanced down at her three kits, sweeping away her tail which covered them, her eyes softened, a low purr rumbling in her chest.

All three kits were blue-gray, with creamy splashes along their tiny pelts. A few splashes of white were mingled with them, giving them a softer version of a tortoiseshell. She assumed that the third kit

was a she-kit as well, considering that most tortoiseshells and calicos were females.

"They're so pretty," Acorndapple said softly. "Have you given them names?"

Pebblelily let out a low sigh, tucking her tail back over the three she-kits.

"I want to wait a bit," she admitted. "I would name them now, but..."

A note of grief welled in her eyes. Acorndapple awkwardly shifted on her paws.

"I just can't focus." Pebblelily's gaze had drifted over to where the still body of the tomkit lay. Just as quickly as her eyes had turned over to the direction, they quickly snapped away. She buried her face in her paws.

"I'm sorry," Acorndapple said quietly, wondering what she could possibly say to comfort the grieving queen. "It's tragic, but you still have three beautiful kits who love you."

Pebblelily didn't stir, making Acorndapple feel less certain that she had said the right thing. Regardless, it seemed that nothing would make her feel better anyway.

With a sigh, she gently touched her nose to Pebblelily's cheek before turning and padding out of the den, silently cursing to StarClan why on earth they had ripped away a life that had barely just begun.

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Author's Note-

Long chapter! Probably my longest one yet! This one was surprisingly easy to write, though. Anyways, I'll be inactive again next week, which has led me to change my update schedule. I feel like my chapters are kind of rushed, and I often miss mistakes in my writing. So to give me more time, instead of once a week updates, it

will now be once every two weeks.

Chapter Thirty-Four

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Paws wrapped around her tail, yanking her backwards. She stumbled slightly, half-turning around and swiping one paw out swiftly. She hadn't expected the blow to connect, yet her paw somehow found purchase, knocking into Flurrypaw. The fluffy she-cat landed on the ground with a *thud*, releasing a short gasp of breath.

"You had plenty of space to move out of the way," Acorndapple pointed out, standing over Flurrypaw with a raised brow as the apprentice fought to catch her breath.

"Yeah, let me try again," Flurrypaw muttered, glaring down at the torn-up ground between them.

Acorndapple took several large steps backwards, allowing her to rise to her feet. Her muscles were tense beneath her pelt as she scanned Flurrypaw's form, preparing for the attack. But as her gaze flicked over the gray she-cat, she tilted her head slightly. The normally bubbly she-cat's eyes were rather dull; the usual spark of excitement upon battle training had utterly vanished. Her tail was dragging against the ground as well, stirring the short tussocks of grass against its brush.

How is she already worn out? We haven't even been practicing for that long!

Acorndapple's eyes re-focused as she caught the movement of Flurrypaw's muscles tensing beneath her pelt. Her hind legs pushed off the ground, propelling her towards Acorndapple. However, she quickly side-stepped, causing the she-cat to sail past her and skid roughly on the dirt of the Training Grounds.

Acorndapple had opened her mouth, frustration souring her pelt as she prepared another critique. But Flurrypaw had quickly risen, crouching, before lunging at the mottled she-cat again. Though she was on her paws quickly, her attack was half-hearted; Acorndapple had no trouble pushing her to the ground.

"I hate this!" Flurrypaw burst out, a whine wavering in her voice as she wriggled free from Acorndapple's grip. She turned away, licking the ruffled fur on her pelt roughly.

"Great StarClan, what are you, a *kit*?" Acorndapple snapped, glaring critically at Flurrypaw. "There's a good chance we'll have a huge battle coming up, so you can't just sit here and whine and complain about it! You need to pull your act together and start learning how to *fight*."

"That's the problem!" Flurrypaw turned around sharply and glared at Acorndapple with her ears flat across her head. "I'll never be a fighter like Luckpaw or Amberpaw. They always make me doubt if I can actually fight. I don't even know anymore!"

"What's gotten into you? You were able to battle train the other day without all of this complaining," she muttered, in a low voice that was intended for Flurrypaw not to hear. However, her gray ears twitched, and she shot a look that shook with a fresh layer of hurt.

A heavy, gripping silence settled over the two of them as they stood in the large clearing. Flurrypaw had now directed her gaze towards the ground, focusing her attention on scribbling her claw through the dirt. Acorndapple just swept her tail back and forth indecisively, biting her tongue as she realized that now, there was no choice left but to talk with her.

"It's all in your head," she said finally, her sharp tone slicing the air like a claw cutting open a wound. Flurrypaw flinched, startled, but refused to look up. "You're letting your jealousy get the better of you. Keep it inside of you. Don't let these emotions drive you. It causes discouragement not only for you, but also for others around you."

Flurrypaw finally met her probing gaze with burning copper eyes,

her plumy tail swishing through the fronds of grass.

"But how am I supposed to stop... *feeling?* How do I stop feeling upset when it's just how I naturally react?" The apprentice's voice faltered as she spoke.

"You don't stop having feelings, you just need to learn how to avoid *spreading* your negative emotions to cats around you. Just try to control them, at least on the outside," Acorndapple reprimanded quickly.

Flurrypaw just gave a slight nod, her copper eyes moving to the ground once again, where the dirt was marred by her claw marks. Although she finally seemed to have calmed, the prickling fur along the apprentice's pelt was still visible, and the crushing weight of frustration emitting from her dragged down the air.

She thinks I don't understand, but I do. She needs to learn.

Suddenly, a flash of doubt seared through her. What if she were telling her own *apprentice* the wrong things? What if her lessons were completely false and were only causing more harm?

She shook away the thought as if it were a burr clinging to her pelt.

Flurrypaw has proven herself to be a capable cat so far with everything I've taught her, despite today. She can push through.

Suddenly, a low yowl shook the pine needles in the treetops above them. She pricked her ears, sharply turning in the direction of the noise. It had come from the center of the camp. Because of the Training Ground's close quarters to the main clearing with the Shade Rock, she could make out the tiny pale-gray silhouette of Lakestar situated on the large boulder, her commanding voice ringing in the air.

"Clan meeting. Let's head back to camp," Acorndapple announced. *And quickly, so Lakestar doesn't accuse me of something.*

Flurrypaw looked slightly relieved, short silver-gray legs moving quickly as she hurried ahead of her, bounding across the log over the stream that separated the Training Grounds from the rest of

camp. Acorndapple followed her pawsteps, shoulders hunched with an uneasy tension that knotted up her muscles.

The camp was bustling with life, cats finishing their evening meals and chatting contentedly as the comfortably warm sunlight of Leaf-fall shone down on them. But attention had shifted over to the looming form of Lakestar, who glared critically down at her clanmates. Acorndapple flattened her ears, beginning to pad over to the bottom of the boulder. However, before she could barely take another pawstep, Strawfur immediately approached her, blocking her path. She let out a long sigh of annoyance.

"Acorn, after this meeting, we need to talk with Cherryspark," he said, his voice low with urgency, and cobalt eyes dark and pressing as he watched her.

"Really? I have better things to do instead of dealing with her drama today," Acorndapple snapped, shouldering past him.

Acorndapple quickly settled down, making sure to avoid Strawfur, who was now lingering where she had shoved past him, gazing at her with flattened ears. She pricked her ears and began to watch Lakestar carefully from narrowed eyes. The frown on the pale-gray cat's face had not ceased, causing her heart to start picking up pace as countless possibilities darted in her mind. It wasn't exactly unusual for Lakestar to look this grumpy, but what if something had happened?

What if she found out that I was talking with Copperleap at the last Gathering?

The fur along her spine prickled anxiously at the thought. Although if Lakestar *had* seen her talking with the tom, she certainly would've accused her that very night.

But what if someone had *witnessed* the entire argument and decided to rat her out more recently?

Shell attended the Gathering that night.

Her hackles rose as she glanced over at the red-brown she-cat. She

was next to Brookdaisy under the shade of the cedar positioned near the clanrock. Her calculating yellow eyes were focused on Lakestar, but as if she had sensed Acorndapple's stare boring into her, she turned and glanced over at the mottled she-cat. She sharply whipped her head away, heart spiking in beat. From the corner of her eye, it was not difficult to catch the smirk forming on Shell's face.

Once the majority of the clan had gathered, Lakestar leaped off the Shade Rock, standing at the bottom so she stood at everyone's level. Goldpelt quickly followed, settling beside her. The old pale gray tom looked more weary than usual: his shoulders were hunched, and his eyes were dark and half-lidded. It was not difficult to assume that his exhaustion was caused by Lakestar.

Acorndapple felt some of her anxiety fade upon noticing Lakestar's calm expression—or, in other words, Lakestar's definition of 'calm'. Although no sparks of anger flamed in her cobalt eyes, she looked rather grumpy with her eyes narrowed and fur spiking along her speckled pelt. Even then, this appearance wasn't exactly *abnormal*.

"Well, I'm going to need all of your opinions on whether or not we should let them take our territory," Lakestar muttered, refusing to look at her clanmates any longer and now staring down at her paws.

Goldpelt gave a nod of encouragement at her words, causing Acorndapple to stifle a snort of amusement.

Hah! He must've forced her to do this!

"We can't let them steal our territory!" Cherryspark's yowl caused her to jerk her head up in surprise. "We need it! I say we fight them!"

She suddenly caught the piercing yellow gaze of Fernfur glaring at Cherryspark as she spoke, heavy disapproval written as clear as daylight in his expression. The fleeting sense of curiosity was almost immediately replaced by irritation as her thoughts swiveled back to Strawfur, and how downright *nagging* he was about talking to Cherryspark.

It's not my problem to deal with right now! She lashed her tail across the mossy ground.

Acorndapple's attention shifted away from her father as another yowl lifted in the air, branching off of Cherryspark's tone.

"Yeah! ThunderClan and WindClan don't even need our territory!" Brookdaisy agreed, his blue eyes flashing with anger.

Cherryspark shot a hiss of annoyance at the tom, as if merely agreeing irritated her.

"Why would they even want *our* territory? This is so stupid," Honeypelt complained in a grumbling voice.

"I think it's irrational to jump into a fight without any guidance from StarClan." Shrikestripe's calm voice cut through them, gently pacifying the gathered cats as she took a small step forward from her spot next to Chasingfur. "Every battle we've had, I've always searched for the advice of our ancestors. However, their answers have never been completely clear. Since this could potentially end the war, I think it's important that I talk to StarClan beforehand so I can probably decipher their message."

"That's a good idea, Shrikestripe," Goldpelt acknowledged with a nod.

Acorndapple's tail flicked to and fro. *What's the point in asking StarClan? They only seem to cause more trouble*. The thought sent her back to Pebblelily's kit, which had tragically passed away before it barely had the chance to experience *anything*.

"Even then, I think we should make a battle plan ahead of time, just in case it takes too long to decipher the message and we have to jump to battle," Shell piped in, breaking Acorndapple out of her thoughts. "I do have an excellent idea for an ambush." Then, in a lower, snide voice, she added, "Though, I don't feel completely secure with sharing this idea, considering there might even be a traitor within the clan..." Shell's gaze immediately sought her out in the crowd. Acorndapple felt her blood start to bubble with hot fury as other stares turned to her.

Lakestar's ears had pricked, watching Shell closely. Then, she gave a slight nod, as if approving her to continue outright *embarrassing* Acorndapple in front of the entire clan.

Just as Shell opened her mouth to continue talking, Acorndapple leaped to her paws, barraging her with a sudden outburst, shaken by anger.

"Only a disloyal cat would start accusing their own clanmates!" She snarled, whirling around and squaring up to the red-brown she-cat. Fernfur, Runningheart, and Brookdaisy, who had been sitting as a buffer between the two of them, quickly leaped out of the way as she approached Shell with a fluffed-out pelt. "Who is this 'traitor' you're talking about, huh?! Or are you too much of a mouse-heart to say it?"

Shell gazed at her calmly with a flat pelt, refusing to stand up and meet her fighting stance.

"I think we already went over this before, haven't we? It's you, Acorndapple. And you're not helping your case at all by getting so defensive."

"What?! This is fox-dung—" Acorndapple spat, but was quickly interrupted as Shell waved her tail for silence, turning sharply towards Lakestar.

"You see? Look at how quickly she lashes out. She's *dangerous*. Not only to your leadership, but to the entire clan. She's already betrayed the clan multiple times: once by befriending a ThunderClan cat, secondly by giving us the wrong plans, and the list goes on... Seeing how emotional and defensive she is, there's enough evidence to prove that she's still betraying the clan and working behind our backs with ThunderClan."

I am not *emotional! I've done well concealing them! The only reason I'm angry is that I'm getting accused in front of the entire clan!*

"Not only that, but trying to make any decision about whether or not we should actually battle has been awfully difficult with her presence. It's like playing with fire: who knows if she'll tell all our

plans to ThunderClan? Lakestar, you've been working hard as a leader. It will only cause you more trouble to have a cat like her in the clan."

"Quite right," Lakestar muttered a long moment after Shell had spoken, her voice low. "Sometimes I wonder if the loss of just one warrior will affect us all that much..."

Is no one going to defend me?! Acorndapple swung a fleeting glance around her clan. But as quickly as she had looked around, as quickly as gazes had turned away, avoiding her piercing stare. Even Strawfur was refusing to look at her, instead staring down at the ground while shifting his paws nervously.

She gnawed her tongue, trying to fight back the overwhelming surge of anger threatening to drown her. But the one tide that drew closer was the lost, hopeless feeling, seeing that not a single cat offered her defense. If Pebblelily wasn't in the nursery, she wondered if even *she* would take her side.

But why would I expect that? I've acted like a total fox-heart to her in the past. She has no reason to defend me, Acorndapple thought bitterly.

She released a heavy sigh through gritted teeth as feelings swelled through her rapidly. She had already reached the edge and was now dangling precariously over the empty void below.

Eventually, it all snapped.

I'm tired of this!

"Fine! I'll leave if that makes you happy! This is hardly the ShadowClan I knew when I was younger anyway." She whipped around, feeling a sickening jolt in her stomach as her paws carried her towards the entrance. Vines that had once tangled around her body, tightening and gripping her strongly, were now wilting as if disease had plagued them, falling as she broke free. But she still felt their tug, attempting to pull her back, like it wasn't quite right for her to be walking away. And she knew for a fact that she couldn't *just* turn and walk away, leaving everything behind that was so

familiar to her.

She swiveled around, shooting a poisonous look at Shell. *I don't have anything left to lose, do I?*

"I don't want to be in the same clan with the cat that murdered my own *mentor* anyway!" She yowled, lashing her tail.

There were a few murmurs of surprise at her words, but the majority of the clan was staring at her as if she were some sort of diseased animal that had just burst into camp.

"We all know he was killed by ThunderClan, and there's plenty of evidence to prove it. If this is what's gotten you so upset, then maybe it *is* a good idea to leave," said Lakestar, her glinting cobalt eyes narrowed.

"Madder than a fox in a fit," Honeypelt muttered nearby, glaring at Acorndapple as she stood with a fluffed-out pelt.

"Accusing other cats won't help your case, Acorndapple," Shell added in a sickeningly sweet voice, her eyes widened in fake sympathy.

Acorndapple ground her teeth together, searching desperately for a response. But her mind felt conflicted, as if cobwebs tangled her head.

I can't save myself. I've already pushed myself into this. There's no returning.

With a single lash of her tail, she turned and shouldered out the entrance, her throat stinging with hot fury.

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author's note

Nonexistent update schedule for now as I work on finishing the story!!

Chapter Thirty-Five

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An inky-black sky cast long shadows across the looming forest, swamping it into almost total darkness. The only light provided was the stretch of Silverpelt, glimmering mockingly down at her as she fled through the woods, swerving around tall, spindly trunks. The moon was out as well, the harshly glowing light of the waning gibbous piercing through a thin cloud covering.

It certainly would be a smart idea to stop and *think* for a moment, and also consider the fact that she'd left her clan moments ago and was now standing in an unwelcoming territory with no shelter. But the blood roaring in her ears, on par with the sharp fangs of burning emotion, cut through her, distracting her from any sense of logic.

Just as she started to head down the slope that led to the Thunderpath, she felt the dull *thud* of her paw smacking directly into a large tree root mid-run, causing her to let out a strangled yelp of pain, hobbling slightly, before losing balance and plummeting directly to the ground. Control slipping out of her paws like a flighty rabbit, she rolled down the rest of the slope until her body crashed into a large bush, leaves rustling wildly and small branches clattering against her face. She let out a weak groan of agony as the pain of her fresh injuries settled on her full force, now that she was lying still.

Acorndapple lay there for a long stretch of time, eyes round as she gazed up absently at the roof of the bush, heartbeat slowly calming as the adrenaline wore off. She felt no urge to move her throbbing hind paw to a more comfortable position. Even as the prick in her chest goaded her into full-force anger from the entire ordeal, she continued to lie there, gradually realizing that anger would do nothing to take her out of the situation. In fact, it had *put* her in the situation in the first place.

Crickets chirped softly in the depths of the night, other nocturnal insects humming along, completely unaware of her state. Mice scuttled in the undergrowth nearby, while the gentle stirrings of a light breeze carried the soft hoots of an owl. She was almost lulled to sleep, wrapped in the comforting embrace of the familiar sounds of ShadowClan's forest.

But even then, the nagging thought of *'danger'* lurked in her mind, a sharp claw stabbing her every time she began to doze off. She was officially in enemy territory now, a word that she'd never thought to describe the clan she'd grown up in. But she knew that if her clanmates— or her *former* clanmates— found her tomorrow sleeping in a bush, still on their territory, well... it wouldn't look good on her, that was certain.

With a long sigh, she forced herself to move. She winced as the fresh bruises along her pelt brushed against the sharp edges of twigs poking out of the bush as she shouldered through.

"*Snake-dung,*" she hissed as soon as she stepped out in the gleaming moonlight, frowning down at her injured paw. It was just her luck that she had managed to get hurt before she could even assess the entire situation.

I guess they're just bruises, but fox-dung to all of this! There's no way I could survive out here when I got hurt this quickly!

She almost felt like crumpling to the ground as she realized that she had no choice but to answer the burning question in her mind.

Where do I even go?!

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Acorndapple paused at the edge of the Thunderpath briefly. She barely checked whether or not a Monster was coming, and padded briskly across the flat gray stone. The acrid stench of the path clotted her nostrils, causing her to scrunch up her nose in disgust.

"Wouldn't it just be easier if a Monster hit me right now?" She muttered out loud to no one in particular. The air was still as she

hesitated in the middle of the path, the fur along her pelt beginning to bristle.

A faint humming sound from far away resonated in her ears. It gradually grew louder and louder before a deafening roar drowned out the world around her. A brilliant golden light gradually obscured her vision as the Monster loomed closer, its metal face glinting dazzlingly in the headlights. As the earth vibrated with its screeching yowl, she shut her eyes, breath exhaling sharply.

I can't do this!

Her eyes flew open. A heartbeat later, her claws were skidding across the stone as she scrambled over to the grass, her heart practically bursting out of her chest with panic as it ate up the ground between them. Its motion buffeted her fur, wind blasting against her pelt as she retreated the last few steps, collapsing in the undergrowth on the other side. It flew past her, sending the grass and bushes shivering violently.

She trembled between the long weeds that framed her sides, the sensation of grass and stray leaves brushing against her pelt comforting her slightly. She wrapped her scarred tail over her flank, crouching down against the earth.

'That was incredibly stupid. I really thought you knew better than this.' Beetlepelt's brow was furrowed, his yellow eyes steely as he gazed at her.

She shrugged helplessly, avoiding his stare. Then, after a short moment, she glanced back, rounding her eyes hopefully. 'Are you proud of me? I stood up against Shell. I told them that she was the one who murdered you.'

'They don't believe you,' he pointed out.

'Well, I know that*,' she snapped, her voice sharper with irritation. 'But you're proud of me, right? Or I suppose if they didn't believe me, then there's no point...'*

A sharp headache began to throb between her eyes. She drifted back to reality, digging her claws into the dirt.

Have I really become so insane that I started imagining talking to my mentor?! She whipped her tail through the undergrowth, causing it to rustle loudly.

But even then, she almost wished her mind would continue to play the awful trick on her. It had distracted her from the reality of the whole situation, and she'd much rather think of her former mentor instead of deciding where in the name of StarClan she would go.

The night had progressed to moon-high, with the waning light of the silver circle positioned at its center point. In several hours, dawn would approach, and ThunderClan would most likely find her *directly* in their territory. She wasn't certain how they would react upon seeing a cat that was a member of the clan that they were at war with— at least, to their knowledge— but she knew for a matter of fact that it would not end well at all.

She knew with certainty, down to her bones, that she was a clan cat. She couldn't live as a loner, isolated and alone from the world. She could hardly imagine a life without serving her clan, completely abandoning their way of life. It wasn't her. Even if she had acted like a fox-heart to her clan for several moons, they were still very dear to her heart.

So, it seemed that her options had narrowed down to only one choice: join another clan.

And, which clan would that be? She thought derisively. *There's ThunderClan, whose territory I'm in right now. But I'll have to spend my life becoming bald from all the brambles everywhere.*

Then there was WindClan, where she was guaranteed to starve. Plus, not to mention that they were *also* aiding in the war on ThunderClan's side.

Finally, she was left with one last option: RiverClan. On the positive side, they had isolated themselves from the war. However, they swam in the river, *and* their main diet was fish...

It didn't take long to figure out her decision, and she was left with an unsettled feeling of disgust twisting her stomach into knots. She

scoured her claws deep into the dirt, her tail-tip flicking to and fro. She could hardly believe what she was doing right now.

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Acorndapple barely gave notice to the fact that she was spreading a trail of ShadowClan scent throughout ThunderClan's territory as she trekked through the oak forest. The trees stood eerily in the darkness, their enormous crowns of branches forming a net over the star-flecked sky. The ground was littered with shaded brown leaves, adding another layer of difficulty in trying to maneuver through the territory silently. She was hardly worried about any ThunderClan cats hearing her— rather, a predator lurking about in the shadows.

Frankly, she had no idea where she was going. The only landmarks she knew of that distinguished RiverClan from ThunderClan were Sunningrocks and the river, both of which she hadn't seen a whisker of. The main problem was that she didn't know what direction RiverClan's territory lay, so she had no way of telling if she was heading directly for ThunderClan's camp or a completely different direction.

Stupid ThunderClan, living in the most unrecognizable land with hardly any landmarks other than oak trees everywhere, she thought gruffly, stopping to kick at a stray twig.

Eventually, she noticed that the ground had begun to slope slightly downwards. Some of the grass beneath her paws was trampled as well, and upon pressing her nose to the ground, inhaling the scents whirling around her, the overwhelming smell of ThunderClan drifted through her nostrils.

They must use this path a lot, she decided. Choosing to follow the slope of the ground, she hurried down a stretch of grass. The trees were starting to thin; only a few stray ones nestled on the sides of a *very* mini bluff, their large roots tangling around the undergrowth. She skidded to a halt at the edge, peering downwards.

A large river twisted through the land, where stray willow trees poked around the banks. A giant mound of boulders towered at the shore of the river, not too far off from where she was standing,

presumably Sunningrocks. Shallow waters lapped around the mini island where the boulders stood, its ripples reflecting the glimmering light of Silverpelt.

She released a short sigh of relief. *I suppose that wasn't too hard to find.*

Her next concern was *asking* to join the clan. Though the night had drifted past moon-high, it was clear that the RiverClanners were still well asleep. She could wait until dawn, when they began sending out early morning patrols, but that was still far off. But she certainly was not about to saunter into their camp in the middle of the night and request to join.

With a sigh, she leaped down the short distance of the tiny cliff, bounding across several of the large rocks jutting along the sides before reaching the ground with a *thud*. She flinched as her sore paw hit the dirt, still tender after her run-in with the tree root.

Slowly, Acorndapple approached Sunningrocks, keeping to the edge of the bank. The large stones were illuminated to a soft blue-silver glow, utterly smooth from the grinding of river water. The river itself was swollen from recent rainstorms, with sand and gravel building up on ThunderClan's bank from evident flooding.

She scanned her gaze over the boulders, searching for any possible clefts she could hide in while waiting for dawn to arrive. But the thought of one of the large rocks shifting and crushing her while she rested caused her to shudder, and she quickly moved her gaze away, over to the line of reeds and river grass framing the banks.

Without a better idea in mind, she brushed through the towering undergrowth, pushing her shoulders through the thick stems. Acorndapple circled the area, crushing down the fronds of grass for a place to sleep. Finally, once comfortable enough, she settled down, curling her tail over her nose.

The gurgling of the river close by bubbled in her ears, paired with the croaks of frogs and the hum of insects hidden nearby. Even if it almost sounded like the stream running through ShadowClan's camp, *nothing* was familiar. And her body knew this as she floated

into an uneasy sleep, the smells of RiverClan and ThunderClan drifting through her nose.

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After the fifth time twitching awake, unsettled, she realized that dawn light was gingerly spreading across the horizon. Several shades of a pink-orange glowed softly at the edge of the sun's nest, gradually turning into a dark indigo the further up the sky stretched. A few clouds blotched the depths, reflecting the sunlight and transforming them into a bright orange hue, stark against the light mauve colors.

Her eyes sharpened once she blinked away the sleep clouding her vision. She immediately rose to her paws, peeking through the forest of aquatic plants. Several birds were beginning their early morning song, flitting about through the treetops on ThunderClan's land. Wind whistled around their tall trunks, sending burnet-colored leaves fluttering through the air.

When she twisted her head around to glance in RiverClan's direction, she squinted to block out the rays of the rising sun stinging the corner of her eye. Beams of sunlight drifted from the east, illuminating RiverClan's territory into a soft glow. It looked rather peaceful, with no cats visible on their mostly open wetlands.

She clawed the muddy ground anxiously. *Do RiverClan cats not have dawn patrols? Or do they just not wake up this early?*

The other thing that worried her was ThunderClan. She knew they sent out early morning patrols, since she'd encountered one at the border a long time ago while on dawn patrol herself. However, if there was any sign of a patrol nearby, their presence was blocked by the towering oak tree line.

Acorndapple continued to watch for signs of a RiverClan patrol. Soon, her eyes grew half-lidded, tiredness creeping in from the many events that had happened, and an exhaustion for the ones soon to come. At least her fatigue distracted her from the heavy emotions clawing at her heart, now that the shock of leaving her clan had mostly faded.

As her thoughts started to cloud over, she barely noticed the dark figures of several cats maneuvering through the reeds dotting RiverClan's territory, passing by a giant, twisted willow tree as they padded down the river. As their pelts gradually grew more visible, she quickly snapped herself out of the fog, her heart immediately picking up pace.

As they walked to the bank of the river, almost directly opposite to where she was hiding, she quietly rose out of the undergrowth and padded closer to the river, not before shooting a fleeting glance over her shoulder to make sure no ThunderClan patrols were within distance.

"Hey! What's a ThunderClan cat doing out here *alone* at this time of day?"

She recognized the voice as Sandflame, one of the senior warriors of the clan. Her pale ginger fur was fluffed up, eyes narrowed as she glared at Acorndapple.

The other cats in the patrol, a brown tabby tom and a smaller dark gray she-cat, both having identical emerald-green eyes, let out uneasy hisses.

"She stinks of mud. I can smell it from the whole other side of the river," the younger she-cat growled, her eyes sharp as flint.

"Be respectful," the older tom scolded, yet the suspicion in his gaze did not leave as he watched Acorndapple like a hawk.

She took a step forward, lifting her chin and bristling her thin tail. She stood taller, eyes unwavering as she gazed at the patrol. *I'm not a puny little ThunderClan cat!*

"I'm Acorndapple of ShadowClan. I'd like to have a word with Otterstar," she declared, forcing her voice to remain confident.

"What does a ShadowClan cat want with Otterstar?" Sandflame wondered out loud, exchanging glances with the tom. "Well, alright then, come over here. It must be important."

Acorndapple gazed at the rippling expanse of water between them

before gazing back at the patrol, flattening her ears.

The younger she-cat let out a loud snicker of laughter, where she was once again hissed at by the older tom, who was presumably her father.

"Eveningfrost! *Hush!*"

"She seriously can't be afraid of getting her paws wet. Don't ShadowClan cats have a marsh in their territory?" Eveningfrost muttered, casting a frustrated glance at her dad.

"Not everyone's a RiverClan cat," Sandflame answered for the tom, her eyes surprisingly soft as she turned her graying muzzle towards Eveningfrost. Then, she glanced back at Acorndapple, flicking her tail towards where the river ran upstream.

"We've been getting small floods recently because of all the rain, so it's probably better if an inexperienced cat like you didn't try crossing." Acorndapple fluffed up her pelt defensively to 'inexperienced', but Sandflame took no notice and continued. "We have stepping stones down there where you could cross. Follow me."

Sandflame turned sharply and began to stride along the bank of the river, the rest of her patrol following quickly as they headed down the bank.

Acorndapple was mostly hidden by the looming grasses, but still kept a wary eye open for any signs of ThunderClan warriors. It wouldn't be too long before they decided to scour the RiverClan border.

Eventually, Sandflame halted a few fox-lengths down the shore from where the Sunningrocks stood. As Acorndapple paused at the edge of the bank, she glimpsed a line of large rocks jutting out from the water. Occasionally, a large ripple would splash over one of them, causing the fur along her pelt to bristle. Their surfaces were sleek from water; Acorndapple had no doubt they were slippery.

"There's a stretch of shallow water right after the stones, thanks to

the floods, so you'll have to wade through it," Sandflame noted. "Just be mindful of currents."

"I can handle myself," Acorndapple snapped, jutting up her chin. The cats on the patrol shifted their paws awkwardly, not responding. Eveningfrost opened her jaws as if she was about to hiss something at her, but was cut off when her father slapped his tail over her mouth.

The first rock was practically *on* the bank, due to the large buildup of sediment. She simply stepped on it before immediately having to grip her claws around a tiny crack, due to how slick it was. After gathering her wits, she aimed her eyes at the next stone. Some of her confidence drained upon seeing how far it was: from her perspective, it seemed fox-lengths away, poking out of the water like some sort of tiny pebble she was expected to land on perfectly.

And the river is still recovering from a flood, if that makes you feel any better, a voice in her head said sardonically.

She gritted her teeth, tensing her muscles as she prepared to leap. Then, she shoved all her force into her back legs before launching herself at the stone.

Oddly enough, just as she was leaping, she knew for a matter of fact she would not make it to the stone. This was confirmed when she landed a whisker too short, her paws brushing its surface before she plunged into the spiraling abyss of the river. Almost immediately, the current tugged her away in its greedy grasp.

Acorndapple let out a yowl of terror as the water swallowed over her head. Her paws flailed, and bubbles swarmed around her like a disturbed nest of bees, her heart almost bursting with panic as she felt herself being pulled away.

Out of desperation driven by panic, she opened her jaws for a gasp of air, only to be met by water surging through her mouth. Her lungs screamed as the gulps of river water pushed down her remaining oxygen, causing her body to grow freezing with terror.

She was only sinking farther and farther in her panicking state,

despite trying to thrash towards the surface.

As consciousness gradually slipped away, lungs wracking and coughing desperately for air, a gap opened between the storm of bubbles, a dark figure swimming towards her. In her drowning condition, she only barely recognized the cat as Sandflame.

Teeth fastened around her scruff, and only a moment later, she was being propelled towards the surface. Acorndapple grew limp, darkness pressing around her vision.

A moment later, they surged out of the water, light stinging against her eyelids and droplets of water flying in their wake. She immediately opened her jaws, sucking in deep gulps of air.

Sandflame dragged her to the bank, while the tom quickly hurried in to aid the old she-cat. Acorndapple was wracked by coughs as her lungs attempted to expel the water.

Relief swelled through her when her body finally collapsed on the shore, the water once sloshing around inside her nauseatingly now finally calming. She continued to hack up the rest of the river, coughing like a cat plagued by an awful case of Greencough. Eventually, the fit calmed, and she could finally relax back on the ground as she breathed heavily.

Acorndapple cracked an eye open. Sandflame was settled on the ground a few fox-lengths away, clearly recovering, while the tom was cleaning his now ruffled half-dried pelt. Then, he twisted his neck, peering at her with sharp green eyes.

"You know, you ought to thank her. She just saved your life. RiverClanners are advised against swimming through flooded waters, yet she did it anyway," he said curtly.

Acorndapple felt less inclined to say 'thank you' due to his tone, but muttered one out anyway. However, she wasn't sure if Sandflame had even heard her as the ginger she-cat turned to the tabby tom.

"It's alright, Shellfall. My ego isn't harmed if I don't receive a thank you," she said with a chuckle.

"She was acting like she didn't need anyone's help," Eveningfrost sniffed, casting an icy glance at Acorndapple. This time, Shellfall didn't scold her.

She twitched her tail irritably.

"Let's head to camp. You think you can walk?" Sandflame asked, glancing over at Acorndapple.

She mumbled out a "yeah" before picking herself up to her paws, shaking out her now sodden pelt. She gritted her teeth as she was now freezing cold, the water seeping into her skin.

I suppose I'll really look like a RiverClan cat, huh?

Her legs still felt shaky as they began to pad back to camp, Sandflame taking the lead once again despite her weakened state.

The ground was muddy, with insects constantly droning through the air. Swaths of jubilant flowers rose from the undergrowth, glowing shades of golden and pink spreading their petals towards the sun. The terrain almost felt familiar, like the giant marsh sweeping through ShadowClan's territory. She had to avoid stepping on large puddles as she walked, where frogs would gather around them, hopping away into the grass when she placed a paw a little too close.

"I hope you're not trying to get Otterstar to join ShadowClan in the war, if that's what you're here for," Eveningfrost muttered, her voice cutting through the silence like a sharp blade of rock slicing her paw.

Most young cats want to fight in wars, especially seeing that she was made a warrior recently. I'm surprised she doesn't. She seems like the type of cat that would want to.

"If that's even what she's here for," Shellfall pointed out, casting a curious glance at Acorndapple.

"No need to pry," Sandflame said sternly. "It's her and Otterstar's business."

Acorndapple kept her muzzle sealed, focusing on the trek through their territory.

Shellfall dropped back to walk beside Eveningfrost, muttering to her quietly. Acorndapple twitched an ear subtly in their direction, trying to pick up what they were trying to say.

"-And you probably could've jumped in and helped us pull her out," Acorndapple was able to pick up.

"I'm not helping some stuck-up ShadowClan cat," Eveningfrost muttered, shooting a glare at her father.

"But *Sandflame* is a senior warrior, and she needed help pulling her out of the water. Next time something like this happens, you need to show that you're a humble warrior and help out."

"I'm not a kit anymore! I can make my own decisions..."

Eveningfrost's voice faded to the back of her mind as RiverClan's camp appeared into view. A section of the river bent around a small island, guarded by silvery willow trees that draped their curtains of leaves around the camp. The inside of their home was screened by tall barriers of reeds and river grass, forming a protective wall after the river. Water lapped around the edges, gathering into small reed beds.

"You'll have to wade through the river to get into camp," Sandflame announced. "You don't have to worry about drowning. The river isn't as deep over here."

Acorndapple still felt nervous as they approached. Now the sun had risen past dawn point, streams of light drifted through the branches of the willow trees, glinting across the water as it rippled lazily.

She had no choice but to go as Sandflame stepped in without hesitation, the water immediately sweeping up to her shoulders. Acorndapple felt her throat close up with terror as she stopped at the edge, peering into the water with a wide gaze.

"Just go." Evevningfrost gave her a nudge from behind, causing her to stumble forward.

Shellfall and Eveningfrost seemed to have lost their patience as they took in behind her, forcing her to go forward. As much as she wanted to go back, with images of being swept away in the current flashing through her mind, she knew she'd already made it this far, and RiverClan certainly wouldn't let her leave now.

Forcing herself to breathe normally, she stepped in, grinding her teeth together as she felt the water breeze around her paws, as if a slight current was beginning to tug her away. She panicked, kicking out her paws quickly and surging forward desperately.

"Calm down!" Shellfall's yowl rose over her splashing. Teeth closed around her scruff, forcing her to remain still.

"You're not going to drown," Eveningfrost snapped impatiently.

Acorndapple sneezed as water droplets flew up her nose.

Eventually, they made it out of the river without incident, besides several moments where she outright panicked. She almost sank to the ground with relief, but was again given a harsh nudge as she was forced to move on.

A large sedge tunnel formed a path into camp, its grass-like fronds brushing against her soaking pelt as they padded into camp. Her heart sped up nervously as she was reminded all over again of the main reason she had come to RiverClan.

Soon, the sedge opened up into a clearing, where a tiny stream trickled through the middle of camp. It led to a small pool in the center, flanked by large cattails. In the center of the pool, a huge boulder rose upwards, towering above the camp. It was easy to assume this was the clanrock.

Around the camp, large dens circled the barriers. Strangely enough, they were woven by reeds, rather than using a cozy bush as a shelter.

RiverClan cats are odd.

"Grandma!" Eveningfrost bounded away from the patrol, over to where a small blue-gray she-cat sat outside a den closest to the

entrance. Acorndapple recognized the cat as Covelight, who was perhaps the oldest elder out of all the clans.

Apparently, she was born not too long after the clans were founded, she thought, fascinated as she gazed at the elder.

Covelight purred, touching her muzzle against Eveningfrost's cheek.

"How'd your dawn patrol go, my little pebble?" She cooed, wrapping her plumy tail around her granddaughter.

"We found a ShadowClan cat," Eveningfrost said, flicking her tail in Acorndapple's direction. She noticed how the young she-cat's mood had instantly lifted upon seeing her grandcat.

She couldn't help but feel a small prick of jealousy, thoughts flitting back to her own family. She quickly shook her head, trying to clear the memories.

Covelight looked curious, gazing at her as Sandflame and Shellfall escorted her to the center of the clearing, a short distance away from where the clanrock stood. Most of the clan had been sharing tongues and lounging about the camp, but quickly grew wary upon spotting Acorndapple's presence. She was surprised that no one began complaining about her ShadowClan stench, but decided that her entire ordeal in ThunderClan and the river had made her smell less noticeable.

"Sandflame, what's going on? Do you need Otterstar?"

She immediately recognized the voice of RiverClan's deputy, Slatesplash. The lithe she-cat was peeking over the edge of the boulder, her silver eyes round as she glanced from Acorndapple to the senior warrior.

Sandflame nodded, and Slatesplash quickly took off to presumably where Otterstar's den was.

It only took a few heartbeats for Otterstar to arrive. Her glossy brown and white tabby pelt shone in the Leaf-fall sunlight, highlighting the muscles rippling through her fur. The RiverClan leader sprang on the clanrock, who was quickly flanked by

Slatesplash. The much smaller she-cat continued to gaze down at Acorndapple fearfully, while Otterstar cast her a thoughtful look from amber eyes.

"You're Acorndapple of ShadowClan, correct?" Voices in the clearing immediately quieted when Otterstar spoke, her voice soft and delicate despite her powerful appearance.

"Yes." She lifted her chin, meeting her gaze without wavering, despite the blood roaring in her ears.

Otterstar nodded slightly. "I recall you from your warrior name announcement several moons ago at the Gathering."

"A ShadowClan cat, really?! That's awesome!" A young dark gray tom exclaimed, peering at her as if she were some sort of exotic animal.

Eveningfrost was settled next to him and quickly hissed, "*Shut up, fish-brain!*"

Otterstar shook her head at the young warrior, a glint of amusement sparkling in her gaze, before glancing back at Acorndapple. Her brow furrowed, a hint of question lingering in her expression.

"Oh... ah." Acorndapple glanced around the clearing awkwardly as eyes continued to pierce into her. *I suppose I can't talk to her alone, huh?*

"Recently I was..."

She quickly shook her head. It wouldn't look appealing on her if she gave away that she was exiled.

Well, I guess I pretty much exiled myself, since I left on my own accord.

"I left ShadowClan due to personal reasons," she finally said, her voice flowing out with more certainty this time. "That's why I was hoping to join RiverClan."

"'*Personal reasons?*'" A few cats murmured, while Otterstar pricked

her ears.

"If you'd like me to consider you joining, please tell me these reasons since they could affect my clan," the tabby said calmly.

Acorndapple lashed her tail with frustration. *It's none of her business!*

"They're my own personal matters, thank you very much," she snapped, flicking her tail crossly.

There were a few mutters after she spoke, and one cat exclaimed, "*Rude!*"

Otterstar's tail swept across the boulder, her ears twitching back against her head slightly. Her amber gaze hardened.

"Please be respectful to my clan. We have a lot to think about regarding a cat from a different clan joining." Otterstar's tone was more clipped, and she had lost the softer edge of it.

Acorndapple flattened her ears but kept her jaws shut.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" A tom with a grizzled muzzle stepped up, most likely another elder. "Letting in a ShadowClan cat could drag us into the war."

Otterstar swished her tail thoughtfully.

"That's a good point, Ivystream," she acknowledged.

"Yes, it's already peaceful enough, and with Leaf-bare approaching, RiverClan would be put in a difficult position," another cat added from within the crowd.

"What's the harm in having more warriors?" Someone piped in nervously.

"A *war*," another RiverClanner snapped back in response.

"Alright everyone, settle down." Otterstar waved her tail for silence, causing the increasingly loud voices to dim down. Once the camp was completely silent again, the RiverClan leader began to speak.

"My clanmates do make some good points," she mewed, addressing Acorndapple.

"That's stupid, you won't get dragged into a war if I join." Her voice grew hot with frustration at the lack of agreement among the cats in the clearing. Even Otterstar looked as if she were inclining to say no.

"How so?" Now Otterstar's expression had turned into a deep frown, watching Acorndapple skeptically.

"Well, because..." Acorndapple scraped her claws across the dirt with irritation. "Because it's not like they're going to know if I join RiverClan!"

"Acorndapple... you do understand that I would make an announcement at the Gathering letting everyone know you'd joined RiverClan, right?" Otterstar said slowly, the heat of her gaze burning into her pelt. The cats in the clearing began to mutter amongst themselves, gazes boring into Acorndapple.

"Yeah, I guess... but it can't be that big of a deal..." She mumbled. Her body started to feel weak with both fatigue and hunger. A gripping tiredness dragged at her eyes, knocking in the realization that she would not be able to argue her way through this.

Otterstar exhaled a long, tortured breath, unreadable thoughts flickering beneath her eyes, and her brow furrowed tensely as if she were wrestling a decision.

"I'm sorry," she finally murmured after a long, stretching moment, one that seemed to last for seasons. "I understand you need a place to go, but I have to balance the safety of my clan over this... little problem." Otterstar's gaze drifted away, as if refocusing on her own issues within RiverClan once more.

"'*Little problem?!*'" Acorndapple's voice came out as some sort of choked snarl, her last nerve tugged violently. "Is that what I am?! Just a little parasite that needs to be dabbed off?!"

Otterstar's expression drastically changed, eyes narrowing as her

gaze shifted back to the mottled she-cat.

"I think it's best if you leave now," she said curtly, rising to her paws. A few warriors took a step forward.

It's not fair! She wanted to hiss out, but she could barely vent her frustration as weariness pooled over her, like honey seeping through her pelt. She let out a deep sigh as Sandflame gave her a nudge towards the entrance.

"I'll escort her to the border, Otterstar," the pale ginger she-cat announced.

"I can escort myself!" She hissed, surging past Sandflame. However, she continued to follow anyway as she stormed to the sedge tunnel that marked the entrance.

"Careful, Sandflame! She might claw your pelt off!" A cat from the clearing yowled with an edge of nervousness.

"Nothing I can't handle!" The senior warrior called back.

Acorndappple released a growl of irritation, shouldering past Sandflame before diving through the tunnel. That was when she skidded to a halt before the river, staring across its rippling expanse of water.

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Grumbling, she clawed herself onto the bank, while Sandflame gave her a helpful nudge to drag herself onto land. Spluttering up water, she collapsed on the shore, her racing heart finally calming.

"Great StarClan, how on earth will you cross the main river *again*?" Sandflame mused, licking her paw and drawing it over her whiskers.

"I won't. I'll drown." Acorndapple released a half-hearted chuckle, craning her neck around to glance at Sandflame. Surprisingly, despite the dull rush of anger pulsing through her veins, she now felt only bitter as a fog enveloped her.

Sandflame's gaze softened a little, and Acorndapple thought she caught a flash of sympathy in the older warrior's eyes. She grew tense with weariness as she wondered where the sudden change in expression had come from.

"Try to keep your spirits up," said the she-cat gently. "I can tell you're a talented warrior. You shouldn't be giving up on yourself like this."

Acorndapple just shrugged, glaring down at her paws. She wasn't sure what to say, so instead she muttered, "Is there a way to cross into ThunderClan without using the river?"

The pale ginger tabby paused for a moment, as if more words were on the tip of her tongue. Then, she shrugged to herself before sweeping on to answer.

"There's a twoleg bridge that my clan takes to go to the Gathering during floods," she finally said. "It's a bit of a longer walk to get there, but I'm sure you'll prefer it."

Finally, something useful! She leaped to her paws.

"Where's that, exactly?" She asked curtly, her eyes already searching for the direction.

"Head past the main meadow where you'll find a large pond, then keep going until you find where the river separates WindClan from RiverClan. At that point, you'll have to find the bridge in your own, but no worries, you'll know it when you see it." As she gave the directions, she waved her tail towards the area.

"I think I see where you're talking about," Acorndapple said, following her gaze through the territory.

She had already risen to her paws and was starting to set off when she heard a yowl behind her.

"Good luck!" Sandflame called, her pale ginger form stark against the gray-blue waters.

The sun had already drifted past Sun-high as she padded through

the territory, the spongy ground beneath her paws squelching as she walked. Mud coated the landscape, with rivulets of undergrowth scouring through the land. The ground had sloped slightly upwards, and the number of willow trees had reduced to zero, leaving her out in the plain open.

It didn't take long to find the pond. Its sides were clumped with mud, and small fish flickered about in the water, their silver scales glimmering in the sunlight. She paused to lap up a drink before turning and narrowing her eyes, reciting Sandflame's instructions in her head.

She did not need to drive herself mad looking for it. The river came into view, twisting like a snake, stretching by the forest of ThunderClan and towards where hills sloped upwards, the vast moorland scraping the horizon.

From Acorndapple's vantage point, it was rather easy to figure out where the twoleg bridge stood. She could see the strange structure clearly, the brown wood a different shade from the oak trees around it.

She padded down the rest of the territory before pausing at the start of the bridge, inhaling the scents around her. There was no twoleg scent coming off of it, instead just the overwhelming smell of RiverClan. There was also *perhaps* a trace of rouge or loner, but it was stale.

And I'll gladly claw off the face of a rogue, ***especially*** *if it's related to Shell.*

Acorndapple walked across the bridge, feeling the wood creak beneath her paws. Beneath it, the river sloshed about, its hungry currents waiting for her to fall in...

She shuddered, quickening her pace before she finally reached the other side. When she stepped off the wood, the towering oaks of Fourtrees loomed into view, the Great Rock visible even from her vantage point.

But it felt wrong to be looking at Fourtrees in broad daylight, so she

turned away, padding deeper into the woods. The shadows of the oak forest enveloped her, the thick canopy almost comforting as she walked through the forest.

The heavy mist of exhaustion draping over her tired bones only grew worse and worse as she walked on. She'd barely gotten any rest last night, and the entire trek through ThunderClan and RiverClan's territory—not to mention almost drowning in the river—had left her utterly *fatigued*. Plus, she hadn't eaten a real meal since yesterday morning, and her stomach was growling as if a war was clashing in her belly.

"Hey! I finally found the cat that's been *stinking* up the whole forest with ShadowClan scent!" A voice yowled. A moment later, a body crashed into her.

She snarled with pain as she hit the ground with a dull *thud*, her sore limbs screaming in protest. She swiped her claws at the black she-cat who had now pinned her against the grass, but the blow was uncoordinated and missed her by a large length.

"I need help over here!" The cat who had her pinned, Clovershade, yowled back in the woods.

"*Get off me*," Acorndapple hissed. The adrenaline had worn off quickly, and despite her attempts, she was unable to push off the she-cat against her strong grip.

The undergrowth rustled loudly, and a heartbeat later, a black and white tom appeared from the bushes. She recognized the cat as Nimbleleaf, and he was followed by a golden and white tabby tom, another cat she could identify, who was Marigoldgaze.

"Blazestar will be ecstatic," Marigoldgaze said, glaring down at Acorndapple. "Aren't ShadowClan cats supposedly the stealthiest of them all? If so, then why in the name of StarClan have you left your stench *all* over the land?!"

"I'm not a ShadowClan cat," she snapped.

Clovershade choked out a laugh.

"Then what are you, a StarClan cat?"

"I say we go walk all over *their* territory, then bring her to Blazestar and see if we can get more information about ShadowClan," Nimbleleaf hissed, turning a harsh amber glare onto Acorndapple. She returned it, recognizing the tom from a battle she'd fought many moons ago.

"Does it look like I care what you do?! Oh, and I'm *happy* to go talk to Blazestar," she said through gritted teeth.

Clovershade looked over uneasily at the other patrol members.

"I don't know... this seems awfully suspicious. What if it's a setup for an ambush?" She asked logically.

Acorndapple stayed silent, allowing them to worry without offering any input.

"You're right. If the scent trail was from last night, then it might lure more patrols outside to check it, while they can go attack our camp." Marigoldgaze's eyes grew wide with panic.

"Right. They're *ShadowClan* cats, those sneaky little cowards," Nimbleleaf muttered.

"I don't hear anything going on at camp," Clovershade pointed out.

"Let's go and check anyway. Swallowflight and the kits are there. Quickly, too," Marigoldgaze said urgently, his amber eyes rounded. "You two escort her."

Acorndapple didn't bother trying to escape as Clovershade let her up, before she was quickly flanked by her and Nimbleleaf.

The journey to ThunderClan's camp went by in a blur. Her paws dragged on the ground, ears flattened to block out the sounds of the unfamiliar forest around her.

Eventually, the ground began to slope downwards, Clovershade and Nimbleleaf shoving her along as they brushed through a long gorse tunnel. Sand brushed against her paw pads as they left the tunnel,

the camp opening up around them.

She'd been in the camp before, but she was hardly more than an apprentice at the time. Plus, it had been at nighttime, and now that she was viewing their home in broad daylight, it was very different.

The camp was a large ravine, sheltered by thick grasses and ferns. Several tree stumps peeked over the edge at the top, while the towering trunks of oaks scraped the sky. It was surprisingly cozy, well tucked away from predators.

She was nudged down a pathway of boulders into the main portion of the camp. From there, she could see a huge set of boulders, with a small cave carved into it, draped by a veil of lichen.

A lot of the aspects of the camp seemed similar to ShadowClan's in a way. However, instead of holly, the clan relied mostly on brambles for the barrier and dens.

The camp was practically empty of cats... besides a few of them. The fur along her pelt immediately bristled when she spotted Blazestar, seated close to where a pile of fresh-kill lay. He was speaking in an urgent tone with ThunderClan's medicine cat, Mistywillow.

Marigoldgaze looked immensely relieved, seeing that the camp was not, in fact, under attack. He quickly hurried to the nursery, presumably to go see his mate, Swallowflight.

"Blazestar!" Nimbleleaf yowled, continuing to escort her closer to the leader.

The golden tabby tom immediately jerked his head up, glancing over. Upon seeing Acorndapple being nudged along, his ears pricked with interest, eyes narrowing suspiciously.

"What's this about?" He demanded, while Mistywillow tilted her head at the mottled she-cat.

"She's the one who's been tracking ShadowClan stench *all* over the forest," the black and white tom announced.

"Really! Excellent news that we captured one of them. Have there been any reports of others?" Blazestar's pale yellow eyes had brightened.

"No, because it's just me," Acorndapple muttered, answering for the two warriors.

Blazestar immediately turned a glare on her. Then, a moment later, his eyes sharpened with interest.

"Clovershade. Nimbleleaf. Thank you for your help. I'd like to speak with Acorndapple privately," he said, without moving his gaze away from the she-cat. Acorndapple's fur immediately bristled at the fact that he knew her name. On the other hand, the two warriors looked annoyed, torn with visible curiosity, but left anyway at their leader's order.

"Ah, so are you the one that Sparrowlight used to help with the ambush?" He asked as soon as they left.

"Yes," she muttered, mood souring further at the mention of the brown tabby.

"Oh, yes, that's right. Anyways, what I'm wondering right now is why you've placed an entire trail of ShadowClan scent *all* over the forest, down to Sunningrocks, and all along the river. You know, my whole clan has been scouring the whole forest since this morning after a report of the trail." A sharp edge cut through Blazestar's tone.

"I left ShadowClan before they could exile me. I went to RiverClan and was denied, then I went here," Acorndapple snapped, too exhausted to mince her words. Mistywillow blinked with surprise at her directness, and even Blazestar's eyes rounded as if caught off guard.

"Exiled for what?"

"ThunderClan. They thought I was allying with your clan, all thanks to Sparrowlight," she said without missing a beat, continuing to glare up at Blazestar. She'd never thought she would get the chance

to finally blame ThunderClan's leader for allowing Sparrowlight to be one of the cats who had ruined her life.

Blazestar raised a brow.

"I mean, I'm not surprised that Lakestar did that. She's young and rash, and she jumps to decisions quickly," the tabby tom said.

Acorndapple stayed silent, although she completely agreed with the tom.

"So, Acorndapple, I know you are not on the best of terms with my clan at the moment, but why don't I make it up to you? I'm willing to offer you an invitation into the clan." His eyes gleamed. "In exchange for anything useful I should know about ShadowClan."

She simply shrugged, letting out a sigh as she imagined curling up into her nest.

"Okay, that's fine," she muttered.

So I guess I'm a ThunderClan cat now. Huh.

She stifled a chuckle. She didn't think her life would go so downhill, to the point where she'd be becoming a *ThunderClan* cat.

And now I get to be in the same clan as Sparrowlight and Copperleap.

For the first time since that morning, her stomach began to churn into knots with dread.

"Hey, Nimbleleaf and Clovershade!"

Blazestar had turned and yowled at the two warriors, who were lingering around the edge of the camp. They pricked their ears at the golden tom.

"Go out in the forest and see if you can find a few patrols hanging around. Tell them I'm calling a clan meeting, and go back to camp quickly," he ordered.

The two warriors dipped their heads before hurrying out the

entrance.

"Wait over here, below the High Rock," Blazestar told her, waving his tail over to the large set of boulders with the cave carved through it. He leaped onto the top, while she settled down on the sand.

Her eyelids began to droop as she waited in the center of the clearing. The sun had dipped past its center point and was now beginning its slow descent to the horizon. It cast warm rays of light onto her pelt, and as she basked out in the middle of it, she slowly began to drift to sleep...

The pounding of paws hitting the ground caused her eyes to fly open. Nerves fizzed in her stomach as if a disturbed swarm of bees were buzzing inside it, causing the fur along her spine to prickle. A moment later, voices began to drift through the camp.

"It smells like ShadowClan and RiverClan barged through here," a raspy voice complained.

"Specklelight! What were you doing out on patrol?! You should be in the elder's den!" A tortoiseshell she-cat, Applebriar, had fluffed up her pelt worriedly at the old ginger she-cat.

"What do you think's gonna happen, I'll drop dead while hunting a mouse?" Specklelight glared at the pretty warrior. "I'm not cooping myself up in a stuffy den all day!"

Another elderly she-cat brushed out from the tunnel, her golden and white pelt flecked with leaf litter and a vole dangling from her jaws.

"You too, Foxdawn?!" Applebriar hissed.

"Now what is she worrying about?" Foxdawn chuckled, brushing past Applebriar and leaving her staring at the two elders with frustration.

Her heart immediately sank as she noticed Sparrowlight's familiar tabby pelt through the small jumble of cats at the entrance. Then, she padded past them.

"Yeah, it *does* smell weird in here!" Sparrowlight complained loudly. As the she-cat bounded down some of the boulders near the entrance, her pelt grew more visible. Long scars snaked down her flanks, reaching and wrapping around her shoulders like long rivulets of ivy. Around her neck, a deep scar eroded the fur close to her jugular, a dull red color that indicated it had only fully healed not too long ago.

I *gave her those scars at the Gathering ambush*, she realized, glancing down at her claws, which were digging into the sandy ground.

A slight flash of triumph ran through her veins.

She may be the cause of the scars on my tail, but I gave her even worse scars in return!

"What's *she* doing here?" Sparrowlight's voice wavered with shock as she paused near the High Rock, her doe-brown eyes immediately rounding.

"I'll explain in a moment," Blazestar promised,

The scarred she-cat leaped up the tumble of boulders, quickly settling beside Blazestar. She then immediately met Acorndapple's furious glare, returning it with a wide grin.

The presence of the tabby reminded Acorndapple of her dislike of ThunderClan all over again.

The ThunderClanners quickly finished gathering around the boulder, settling down at a wide berth from Acorndapple. She dug her claws further into the ground as she noticed a familiar prick of russet-tabby fur from the corner of her eye, and the heat of his hazel gaze burning into her.

Surprisingly enough, she found that it was not too difficult to identify the ThunderClan cats. There was Thistlebriar, situated a little ways below Blazestar and Sparrowlight on the High Rock. Then the two medicine cats, Mistywillow and Snailpounce, who were sitting not too far off from Acorndapple, along with the mediator, Nettleblossom.

The only senior warrior of the clan was Nimbleleaf, while some of the other, more mature warriors included Marigoldgaze, Doeleap, and Applebriar. She remembered that Sparrowlight, Copperleap, Clovershade, and Snailpounce were all littermates, and therefore, she could draw the conclusion that Applebriar and Doeleap were their parents, upon seeing the distinct similarities between the cats.

Swallowflight was currently in the nursery, most likely with Marigoldgaze. She'd also heard once that Ferncurl, the second mediator of the clan, had given birth to her kits not too long ago, so it was easy to assume that she was in the nursery as well.

"Today was spent looking for potential ShadowClan warriors on our territory, after Doeleap had found scent trails while on dawn patrol," Blazestar began, twitching his ear towards the russet tom in acknowledgement. Doeleap dipped his head in return.

"About an hour before now, Marigoldgaze's patrol discovered Acorndapple, a ShadowClan cat who left her clan and was seeking shelter here. I've allowed her to stay."

"You know we're at war with ShadowClan, Blazestar!" Nimbleleaf exclaimed, lashing his tail.

"Are you sure this is a good idea?" Applebriar advised carefully, glancing up at Blazestar with flattened ears.

"In exchange for allowing her into the clan, she'll share information about ShadowClan with me," he added quickly.

She almost scoffed out loud. *What information?*

Sparrowlight quickly turned and hissed something into Blazestar's ear. However, her voice was too low for Acorndapple to pick up, leaving her wondering what the brown tabby had said. But it was not hard to suspect that it was nothing positive, to say the least.

"Could she tell us something important now?" Doeleap asked, his tail sweeping across the ground. The russet tom's brown gaze looked conflicted as he shot an uncertain glance at Acorndapple.

Blazestar glanced over at her expectantly.

"Uhhh..." She furrowed her brow. *Ah, Shell's stupid plan that she was trying to keep from me.*

"Someone brought up the idea of ambushing the patrol when you start claiming part of the territory," she finally said, straightening up with a small hint of newfound pride that she was ratting out Shell's idea.

Blazestar nodded.

"Thank you. I suspected ShadowClan would do something like that anyway if Lakestar decided she actually wanted to keep the territory," he mused. Then, he let out a yawn, glancing up at the sky as orange shafts of evening light slanted on his golden pelt, sparking his fur into a fiery shade of citrus.

"Alright, the meeting is over. Acorndapple, because you're an official warrior of the clan, feel free to make a nest in the warrior's den, if someone could kindly show you where it is. Clan dismissed!"

As soon as Blazestar finished, the cats in the clearing began to split off, murmurs rising in the air as warriors gossiped about the news. Sparrowlight immediately started to speak urgently with the golden tom, her doe-brown eyes sharp as flint.

"He let her off way too easily!" Applebriar whispered fiercely to her mate, Doeleap, both of whom were standing nearby.

"Hey, I can help you find the warrior's den."

Acorndapple almost jumped out of her fur as Thistlebriar suddenly approached her. She took a tiny step backwards. Something about the deputy made her uncomfortable, yet she couldn't place a paw on what it was exactly.

"I can find it on my own..." She trailed off as Copperleap's familiar russet-tabby pelt appeared in the corner of her vision.

"Hey, Acorndapple! Need help finding the Warrior's den?" Copperleap's voice split through the air, oddly cheerful despite their last encounter at the Gathering.

She would've much rather refused and found the den on her own accord, but in Thistlebriar's presence, every hair on her pelt screamed to get away from the tom. She gave a quick nod to Copperleap before following him through the small crowd of cats, relief surging through her once she was away from Thistlebriar.

An awkward silence settled over the two of them as she walked at his flank, although at a slower pace, so they weren't directly side-by-side. Her tail twitched uneasily, stomach churning.

Eventually, they reached a large bramble bush that was situated against the rock walls of the camp, reinforced with vines of thorns and twigs.

"You can use Ferncurl's old nest," he told her after they stopped near the entrance of the den. "I'll go grab some fresh moss for you."

She was too tired to protest as Copperleap hurried off.

Time passed rather quickly, and only a few moments later, Copperleap had reappeared from the opposite side of the camp, a large bundle of moss clutched in his jaws.

She followed him inside the den, and he dropped the moss in the nest that Ferncurl had presumably used. As soon as he left, she settled down, every inch of her body sighing with relief as the cushioning sank into her bones.

That was the fastest Acorndapple had fallen asleep in her entire life.

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author's note

I don't normally write chapters this long (and you won't catch me writing one this long again). I'll try to keep it at 2k-4k words. Anyways, hope you enjoyed!

Chapter Thirty-Six

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She slunk around the ferns along the side of the warrior's den, creeping into some of the overgrown grasses that waved in the breeze. Her paws shook as she settled down, eyeing the camp through her sun-lit gaze.

The patrols Thistlebriar had sent out earlier that day were returning to camp, cats gradually filling the clearing as everyone settled down for their noon meals. Acorndapple hadn't participated in any of the patrols, her deep slumber stretching until almost sun-high.

At least the fog of exhaustion that had clung on like a tick had finally vanished, and as she peered at the camp, her eyes gleamed brighter, shifting around the clearing. However, her stomach began to twist into knots, and her claws worked their way through the sandy ground.

In almost every way, being in a new camp felt *wrong*. Even more wrong was the fact that she'd shared the same den with cats she utterly despised, as if she'd been thrown into an open field and was left completely exposed. She wanted desperately to be back in her old pine needle-woven nest, but an image of Shell's red-brown pelt gradually formed in her mind, sending a shiver of anger through her body.

She exhaled a sharp breath, attempting to dispel the heavy emotions closing around her throat.

If she were ShadowClan, cats would be staying at camp and resting for their late afternoon patrols. But it seemed that ThunderClan's ways were very different. Everyone only took a brief break at camp to eat before returning to their patrols. Her stomach grew even more knotted at how foreign everything felt.

A tortoiseshell pelt flashed at the edge of her vision, causing her to quickly glance up. Applebriar had bounded over to Thistlebriar, who was perched on the smaller set of boulders at High Rock. Her black and ginger-speckled tail was lifted energetically, and a moment later, Doeleap padded to her side. A few tail-lengths away at the entrance of the nursery, Marigoldgaze had touched his nose in a farewell to Swallowflight before hurrying after the two warriors, presumably to join the patrol. His mate was lounging outside the nursery with Ferncurl, splayed out in a beam of sunlight and eyes half-lidded as they watched their kits play-fight.

Perhaps I should join Applebriar's patrol.

Doubt wormed through her chest.

Would they even trust me enough to help with regular duties?

She slipped out from the undergrowth anyway. Then she paused, quickly craning her neck over her shoulder to rasp down the messy clumps of fur with her tongue, picking out the pieces of moss embedded into small knots within her pelt. If she joined then, she at least wanted to look a bit more approachable.

She glanced back, heart sinking in her chest upon realizing that Applebriar's patrol had already left, and the rest of the clan was still busying themselves eating.

A twig crackled loudly, splitting the air and causing her to stop completely in her task. Acorndapple jerked her head up sharply just as the dark ginger pelt of Thistlebriar appeared into view, slowly approaching her.

Her hackles rose, heart suddenly picking up speed. But as she peered closer, she realized it was not, in fact, the eerie tom. Rather, it was Copperleap, a thrush swinging from his jaws. The tantalizing smell of prey washed over her tongue.

Acorndapple's posture relaxed, but just slightly, as she gazed at the ginger tom warily.

"Uh... hello. Are you hungry?" His voice, although muffled by the

bird, broke the silence as he stopped about a tail-length away, dropping it on the ground and pushing it closer to her with his nose in a careful fashion.

She licked her jaws, forcing her breathing to become shallow in an attempt to ignore the enticing smell of thrush pricking at her nose.

"I need to go on a patrol first." Acorndapple shoved it away forcefully with a stray paw.

"Thistlebriar will send out another patrol in a bit, so you might as well eat something while waiting." He avoided her gaze, focusing his hazel eyes on the walls of the ravine.

Her gaze flickered down to the thrush. The word 'no' was lingering at the edge of her tongue, yet she hadn't eaten in two days... as if in response to the thought, her stomach gurgled loudly.

Copperleap's face brightened with triumph.

"See, I knew you were hungry!" He exclaimed with a large, infuriating grin crossing his expression. The grin quickly faded, replaced by a more serious look as Acorndapple shot him a glare.

"You might as well eat," Copperleap said more smoothly, pushing the fresh-kill slightly closer with a paw.

"Fine, I'll take it, but I'm *not* eating the entire thing. You can have the rest so we're both poisoned," Acorndapple muttered, giving in.

"Well, in that case, I guess we're both dying." He blinked at her innocently.

Her mind was already focused on the fresh-kill as her stomach growled even louder in protest to her lack of eating.

Acorndapple sat up into a crouching position, leaning over to take a bite of the thrush. As soon as she ripped past the feathers, sneezing as a few fluttered into her nose, she tore into the main portion ravenously. It wasn't long before she was left with a pile of feathers and gleaming milky-white bones, her stomach grumbling uncomfortably due to the shock of suddenly eating a meal after

several days.

Copperleap's eyes had rounded, glancing down where the bird once was.

"I suppose you're not that worried about it being poisoned, then," he said jokingly.

Acorndapple just flicked her tail in response, swiping her paw to clean off her bloodied whiskers. She couldn't help but eye Copperleap from the corner of her vision as she worked away at her pelt. Her wariness about the tom hadn't left, and she wasn't exactly ready to brush off her resentment like a petulant kit that needed to apologize to their sibling.

But she wasn't about to sit in silence and allow him to think she was comfortable with him.

"How's Sparrowlight?" She asked casually, pausing in the middle of her grooming. She knew she was jabbing at a nest of hornets, but she hardly cared when there was barely anything left to lose.

Copperleap's ears jutted up with surprise, before quickly flattening as a sulky expression took over his face. Acorndapple didn't pay much attention to his darkening mood; instead, she watched him, *goading* him to answer the question.

"Can we just forget about her? I know you don't like her, so there's no reason to keep bringing it up," he sighed after a long, drawn-out moment.

"'*Forget about her?*'" She scoffed. "I don't think you realize that she's the reason I got kicked out of my own clan!"

"Look, I'm not trying to upset you," Copperleap jumped in quickly. However, Acorndapple's tail was still lashing angrily.

"She worked against me with Blazestar for ThunderClan's own benefit," she snapped. "How could I just *forget* that?"

Copperleap worked a claw through the ground, his hazel eyes narrowed as if a battle was breaking out in his own mind.

Acorndapple rose to her paws, ready to march off. She wasn't sure why Copperleap had even bothered to talk to her in the first place; she had made it more than clear that she still didn't trust him. And after the situation with leaving ShadowClan, his presence only soured her mood even further.

As she began walking off, she paused for a moment. Then *why* did he keep attempting to make conversation with her?

He's trying to befriend you so he can stab your back later like Sparrowlight, her mind answered.

Yet Sparrowlight had never seemed *this* genuine... or perhaps he was doing an awfully good job at manipulating her.

She shook out her pelt, attempting to dislodge the confusion sticking to her fur like stubborn ticks. She trudged over to the High Rock, where Thistlebriar was splayed out on the cluster of boulders, the midday sunshine seemingly lulling the tom to sleep. Acorndapple cleared her throat, causing the deputy to crack an eye open. His eyes opened wider, interest sparking his gaze.

"Could I go on a patrol?" She asked, her voice ringing out loudly. The question sounded more like an order, but she couldn't care less.

"Go ahead," the tom said in a silky voice. Then, he glanced over to where Clovershade was settled several tail-lengths away, and in a sharper tone, he added, "Clovershade, go with her."

Acorndapple wrinkled her nose. She almost wished she could patrol out on her own, but she knew for a fact that the clan wouldn't trust her alone in the forest, especially given that it was only her first full day living in ThunderClan.

Clovershade immediately got to her paws, but not before shooting a wary look at Acorndapple through narrowed eyes. She then turned and, with prickling black fur, marched to the entrance.

Acorndapple put some distance between the two of them, finding a comfortable pace several fox-lengths behind Clovershade. As they continued walking through the sunlight-dappled forest, her

thoughts flitted back to Copperleap.

What reason does he have to manipulate me, then? He knows I'm staying in ThunderClan.

What if he genuinely wants to be my friend?

She quickly shook her head. That couldn't be right. He was Sparrowlight's brother, after all, and she'd learned that the two of them had always been the closest out of all of their littermates.

Acorndapple let out a sigh, hitting her tail against the undergrowth and hardly paying attention to the fact that she was likely scaring off potential prey.

One thing was for certain: if his sister was a traitor, then he couldn't be trusted. So, if she couldn't figure out his intentions right away, then she would have to keep a close eye on him for now.

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Chapter Thirty-Seven

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Acorndapple grumbled as her pelt snagged on a bramble, stabbing into her skin. Releasing a hiss of pain, she dug her claws into the ground and wrenched herself out of its lethal thorns, leaving behind several clumps of fur.

"Great StarClan," Swallowflight muttered, her brown-and-cream tail twitching with obvious frustration.

Thistlebriar was leading a hunting patrol that consisted of Acorndapple and Swallowflight. Although she still had kits in the nursery, they were almost of apprentice age, and the queen had insisted on getting fresh air out in the forest.

Acorndapple glowered at Swallowflight as the tabby turned and trotted up to Thistlebriar's side. Although she knew it wasn't true, she still couldn't push away the suspicion that 'getting fresh air' was a lie, and instead she had wanted to leave the nursery just to torment and judge Acorndapple's every little move.

And I don't get how she expects me to get used to a new territory so quickly!

Annoyance ran through her as she stepped on the trailing tendril of a vine of thorns leading from a bramble bush. Quickly, she yanked her paw upwards, biting back a huff of exasperation. Luckily, the thorns only grazed her pad since she didn't set down her foot completely, but it still caused her mood to sour even further.

At least Swallowflight hadn't noticed. The queen's attention was pried away from Acorndapple's noisiness and was now focused on talking in a low murmur with Thistlebriar.

Every one of her senses had been directed toward moving through the forest like a feather drifting through the wind. Her eyes

occasionally flitted down to her paws to confirm that she wasn't about to step on any twig or dead leaves. Her whiskers brushed against the undergrowth, allowing her to be careful of the rustling shrubbery. Her ears were stretched for signs of prey nearby, while her nose did the same work.

Walking through ThunderClan territory seemed to make the most simple tasks much more difficult than they should be. It was almost impossible to place a paw down without stepping on some sort of leaf litter or accidentally brushing against a couple of noisy bushes.

Her nostrils flared as the warm scent of mouse drifted through her nostrils. Glancing in the direction of the potential prey, she spotted a flash of light gray. Peering closer, she made out the small body of the rodent sifting through a pile of leaves.

Pausing to make sure the patrol didn't mind her splitting off, she peeled away before beginning to circle the mouse as carefully as possible. Once she was certain that she was hidden enough, she slunk closer to striking distance, drawing herself into a pouncing position. She wiggled her haunches, preparing to leap. As she pushed off the ground, a pile of leaf litter that was positioned beneath her feet crackled as her paws sank into it. The mouse quickly scurried off, darting into the bushes while she landed on empty ground.

"*Snake-dung*," she hissed under her breath, lashing her tail with frustration.

How in the world does ThunderClan manage to catch anything in this stupid forest?!

She made her way back to the patrol, still huffing to herself. Thistlebriar and Swallowflight were continuously engaged in conversation, clearly in no rush to look for any signs of prey.

Acorndapple's twitching tail stilled slightly as her eyes flicked over to Swallowflight. Perhaps the queen was focusing on enjoying the fresh air as much as possible, rather than hunting, since she hardly caught the chance while cooped up in the nursery caring for her litter. Although a little more understanding for Swallowflight

softened her anger, it was difficult to shake off the burr of annoyance ridden in her pelt.

As she resumed her original task, which was padding behind the duo before she had gone after the mouse, her ears pricked with interest as she noticed how quietly the two of them were speaking. She hadn't exactly been interested in what they were talking about in the first place, but they *were* speaking in rather low voices. It wouldn't harm if she eavesdropped a little bit, just so she could see what could be so important that they completely ignored the rest of their duties. Due to how low they were talking, she had to stretch her ears to try to pick up snippets of the conversation, listening like an owl.

"...Losing one of my kits has really taken a toll on me. But I could never imagine losing my entire litter of kits, let alone my mate. That's awful." Swallowflight was blinking sympathetically at the dark ginger tom, her yellow gaze dark. "I couldn't live without Marigoldgaze."

"But what if she didn't just vanish, like everyone thinks, but instead a fox or some kind of predator got to her while I wasn't there to fight them off?" Thistlebriar trailed off miserably, his head hanging low.

Swallowflight rested her tail on his shoulder comfortingly, opening her jaws to begin reassuring him. Acorndapple stared at them, her eyes growing round.

Are they talking about Pebblelily?

"Try to keep your hopes up," Swallowflight advised, blinking at the tom. She was clearly trying to give him a bit of optimism, but was failing miserably.

Acorndapple's claws dug into the ground anxiously. Neither of the warriors had mentioned Pebblelily's name, so it *couldn't* be true. Nevertheless, she couldn't shake off the gnawing feeling that was gradually growing stronger by the moment.

Plus, Thistlebriar didn't mention his mate expecting kits when, on

the other hand, Pebblelily had been. She didn't want to jump to conclusions too quickly, considering her habit of doing so. But it *did* make an awful lot of sense...

The deputy released a sigh, his gaze focused off into the distance.

"Look, I'm trying to," he murmured. "And I suppose you're right about there still being hope... I haven't been able to shake off the feeling that she's still out there, I just haven't found her yet."

The fur on her shoulders rose involuntarily.

Something about the way he says it makes me really uncomfortable.

She furrowed her brow, gazing off into the distance. She hardly noticed that several branches were crackling beneath her feet as she walked over them. Swallowflight glanced over her shoulder, and Acorndapple quickly jerked her head up guiltily, attempting to blink away the mask dimming her expression.

"Hey, we'll be heading back to camp soon. Have you found any prey?" Swallowflight asked, looking over the empty-jawed Acorndapple.

"No," she said quickly. "I'm about to find some though."

The queen just cast her a suspicious look through narrowed eyes before turning back to Thistlebriar, continuing to pad through the sunlight-dappled forest. Acorndapple hung back for a moment, and once she was sure they were continuing their conversation, she sped up to her previous pace.

"...Blazestar told me there's no point in sending out any more search parties since he believes she left on her own. I don't think that's true, though."

"Right?!" Swallowflight agreed with a frustrated lash of her tail. "It just doesn't make any sense. She loved ThunderClan. Perhaps it had something to do with her family being outsiders... but it still doesn't explain why she left without telling anyone."

"Which leads me back to thinking some sort of predator got to her,"

he grumbled. "You know, Pebblelily was never a strong fighter. I should've been there to protect her."

While Swallowflight cast him another somber glance, Acorndapple had faltered in her step, the hairs along her pelt rising.

I was right. Thistlebriar is the father of Pebblelily's kits.

The pieces were gradually beginning to form together. As much as she wanted to deny it, the truth had just been announced almost directly to her, as disgusting as it was.

Thistlebriar had started to speak again, but Acorndapple was barely listening.

*He has to be at least **forty** moons older than her.* Her stomach twisted nauseatingly. *If she gave birth to her kits recently, then this entire thing must've started when she was an apprentice.*

Acorndapple shuddered, her fur crawling as if ants were running through her body.

She remembered the strange encounter with ThunderClan during a border patrol several moons ago. One of those ThunderClan cats had been Thistlebriar. The rival deputy had been acting rather unusual, barraging the ShadowClan patrol with questions about whether or not they'd seen Pebblelily. At the time, Acorndapple hadn't thought too much of his strange behavior, assuming that the clan was in a desperate need of warriors. But after recalling the memory, it was finally starting to make sense.

I knew there was something off about him. Poor Pebblelily, that must be awful having to deal with such a weird cat. No wonder she left.

Her heart sank further as another thought passed through.

And if she's so worried about him finding her and doing something awful, he must be even worse than he seems.

Acorndapple lashed her tail, glaring at the back of Swallowflight. *How did she not realize how wrong the relationship was in the first place?! Or the rest of the clan?! And they continue to support it and act*

like it was a tragedy that Pebblelily left! She shook her head derisively. *It hardly makes sense.*

Acorndapple wanted to sprint back to camp and immediately question Pebblelily, but she most obviously couldn't.

I need to know why the clan let this happen in the first place, she thought, digging her claws into the ground.

Her eyes focused on Thistlebriar, her disgust of the tom deepening further.

Almost as if he had sensed her burning gaze on his pelt, he glanced up, clearing his throat loudly.

"Let's head over to the Great Sycamore. I saw a few mouse burrows by the tree the other day," he announced. Acorndapple narrowed her eyes suspiciously at how quickly he'd changed the topic.

Swallowflight nodded, following the tom as he veered towards the direction of the ThunderClan landmark. Acorndapple continued to pad after them, even as frustration unfurled in her chest. Her mind was still demanding more answers.

Thistlebriar clearly didn't want to continue the conversation. And, as much as the topic sickened her, she still felt the need to figure out the full truth.

The only cat in ThunderClan she knew she could ask was Copperleap. However, she'd been avoiding the tom ever since their first conversation a couple of days ago. She was still unable to shake off her suspicion, and her distrust latched on like a burr. However, he was at least willing to listen to her...

She sighed quietly. At the moment, she cared a lot more about learning Pebblelily's past. Even if Copperleap *was* a cunning fox-heart, finding answers was her current priority.

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Acorndapple slipped through the camp, empty-pawed, while Swallowflight and Thistlebriar both had fresh-kill swinging from

their jaws. However, her mind barely focused on the fact that she likely wasn't helping her case of looking trustworthy to the clan, considering the fact that she hadn't caught a single piece of prey. Instead, her eyes were roving the camp, searching for a glimpse of his russet tabby pelt.

After a moment, she spotted Copperleap settled at the far edge of camp, nibbling on a shrew that was resting between his paws. The fur along her shoulders rippled with a flash of nervousness. Only temporarily, though, when she shook out her pelt and lifted her muzzle as she remembered her distrust of the tom.

She waited for Thistlebriar and Sparrowflight to deposit their catches, shifting her paws as she stood awkwardly to the side. As soon as they turned and went their separate ways, Acorndapple began to pad over to Copperleap, forcing her paws to remain steady and loosening her tense muscles as much as possible.

When Acorndapple approached, he immediately glanced up from his meal. At first, his eyes rounded with surprise. Then, the expression quickly faded, only for him to blink a greeting. In return, she scowled, avoiding his gaze.

Why is he still trying to act friendly to me?!

"Can we talk for a moment outside camp, please?" Her voice was curt but low as she shot a sharp glance around the few cats spread sparsely through the clearing. Thistlebriar was one of them— the ginger-and-black tom was settled much too close for comfort, perhaps even within earshot.

Copperleap raised his brow. However, he didn't hesitate, mumbling out a "Yeah, of course," between a mouthful of food.

He swallowed quickly before pushing away his half-eaten shrew, immediately rising to his paws. Acorndapple paused for a moment, glancing down at his food.

Is he not going to eat the rest?

She shrugged to herself. If he wanted to waste food, that was his

problem. She wasn't about to seem like she cared by asking.

"Alright, let's go," she muttered.

Pale golden Leaf-fall light set the forest into warm hues as they padded out the entrance, the slight stirrings of autumn gradually spreading across the trees. The array of once glowing emerald leaves now slowly brightened into a yellow hue, mixed with the edges of crisp brown. Some of the jagged leaves had floated to the ground in the breeze, a loud crunch occasionally filling the silence when either her or Copperleap stepped on one.

Acorndapple wasn't exactly sure where she was going, given the fact that she'd only been in the clan for a little less than a moon. Most of the forest still looked the same to her, with either large oak trees or countless shrubs and brambles. Eventually, Copperleap seemed to suspect this and took the lead, heading for a more secluded spot where tall grasses brushed against the wide tree trunks.

"So, what is it?" He asked as soon as they settled down beneath the grove.

Acorndapple gazed past him, frowning. *Won't he think it's weird if I mention Pebblelily, since as far as he knows, I've never met her before?*

She flicked an ear, shaking off the thought. She'd already taken him this far, plus, the nagging questions swarming her head wouldn't allow her to overthink it.

"On the hunting patrol today, I overheard Thistlebriar and Swallowflight talking about this cat called Pebblelily," she began, deciding to start off truthful.

Copperleap tilted his head slightly, a puzzled look forming on his expression as she continued to speak.

"I was just wondering what happened to her." Acorndapple grimaced to herself. It was a flimsy lie. But it was half true, at least.

She knew the second the words had left her mouth that it made absolutely no sense. And she wasn't surprised at all when

Copperleap shot her a bewildered look.

"You know, we didn't have to go out of camp to talk about this," he said carefully, drawing out each word with such care as if he was afraid she might claw his whiskers off. "It's not like some top-secret info, just some old gossip."

Acorndapple shot him a glare, working her claws through the ground.

"Well, I *thought* it was secretive, because on the patrol, both of them were talking about her really quietly, like it was something no one was supposed to know about," she snapped, pausing to draw a breath after the cascade of words. "Plus, I've met her before at the Gathering when we were apprentices, so I'm just confused what could've happened to her."

The bewildered look still hadn't left his gaze, but it faded slightly, allowing a rather wary look to entire his face.

"Well, the story is pretty simple. One morning, we woke up and found that she was missing. After looking everywhere, turns out she vanished without a trace," said Copperleap. "It wasn't too long after her warrior ceremony either, which is pretty odd."

"So you don't think she left on purpose?" Acorndapple probed.

Copperleap furrowed his brow.

"I'm not very sure. A lot of cats think being a warrior was too stressful for her, and others think some sort of diseased animal like a fox could've gotten her in the night. Which also doesn't make sense, considering there was no evidence of blood or anything like that."

Acorndapple found herself gradually growing more confused as the moments progressed. *But if she left during the night, then why did my patrol find her in broad daylight crossing the Thunderpath?*

She lashed her tail with frustration. She had come looking for answers, only to be met with even more questions. *Is this even worth trying to figure out? It's not like I'm ever going to talk to Pebblelily again,*

because at the end of the day, I've left ShadowClan for good.

Her ears twitched as she realized that she hadn't even *considered* the possibility that she wouldn't be talking to Pebblelily again. For some reason, her mind hadn't fully wrapped around the idea that she would not be returning to ShadowClan. So, if she wasn't even affiliated with her anymore, what was the point in trying to discover the full story?

Acorndapple rose to her paws, letting out a sigh. The only thing she had achieved was more questions, and allowing Copperleap to think she was comfortable enough with him to ask about gossip.

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye while he shifted from paw to paw awkwardly. *But... I already got this far. I might as well keep asking. Plus, do I really want to stay here forever?*

She suddenly felt dizzy. Yet again, another thought that she hadn't fully accepted. She quickly shook out her pelt, forcing it to the back of her mind to leave as a problem that would likely resurface later.

"I just think it's weird that Pebblelily, who was an apprentice when I met her, was mates with Thistlebriar, who could likely retire in several seasons," she said slowly, trying to fight off the frustration jabbing at her voice. "Does that not sound strange to you?"

Copperleap visibly grimaced, shuffling his paws on the dirt. Acorndapple took this as her cue to continue.

"That relationship doesn't seem right to me at all. *Is* Thistlebriar a good cat?"

There was a long moment of silence that stretched between them. As Acorndapple began to wonder what could be so difficult about the question that it took *this* long for Copperleap to answer, he suddenly narrowed his eyes as if his thoughts had finally come to a conclusion.

"Just ask me what you really want to know," he said firmly. "You already know the answers to most of these questions anyway, don't you? It seems like you know a lot more about her than you're

letting on."

Acorndapple's eyes narrowed into a glare, fluffing up her fur with immediate defensiveness.

"And *what* are you trying to insinuate?"

"What I'm trying to say is, you seem awfully interested in a cat that you *briefly* met at a Gathering. Which, by the way, isn't very believable. And then you wanted to talk about her *privately* to someone whose whiskers you clawed off the other day?" Copperleap's eyes were growing brighter as if with each word that slipped out of his jaws, he was growing more and more convinced that this was the case.

Acorndapple's whiskers were quivering with irritation, and her entire pelt was prickling with the urge to snap at him. However, silently, she knew she was only reacting because he was right and had finally caught on to her sneakiness. This, however, seemed to tug at her every last nerve violently.

She released, yet again, another sigh, closing her eyes as a headache throbbed between her eyes. It seemed that her only choice left was to tell him the actual, full truth.

Most of her concern about revealing Pebblelily's whereabouts had faded away, since by now she had accepted that ShadowClan was no longer her home and she had *nothing* to do with the cats living there. Instead, what seriously gnawed at her almost *non-existent* patience was the fact that she had been so determined to keep herself closed off from Copperleap, clinging on to the idea that the tom was a dirty traitor and manipulator. But now, she knew he wouldn't leave her alone until she told him what had actually happened.

"Pebblelily joined ShadowClan," she finally muttered out between gritted teeth.

Copperleap's ears immediately pricked upwards. However, the reaction wasn't dramatic; clearly, he had been suspecting this, despite Acorndapple's efforts to remain subtle.

"And then, on the patrol today, I overheard Thistlebriar talking about the situation. Now I know that he was her mate and the *father* to her kits. So tell me, why was ThunderClan so willing to accept such a weird relationship?"

Now, Copperleap was truly shocked. His eyes had grown round, and his pelt was bristling along his skin.

"She was expecting *kits?*" Copperleap echoed.

"Yes, but that's not the point." Acorndapple lashed her tail, pausing for a moment to work up what she wanted to say. The situation was only encouraging her to grow even more determined in her claim that ThunderClan was full of a bunch of terrible and traitorous cats.

"ThunderClan is *hopeless*," she hissed. "No wonder Blazestar allowed me to join so quickly."

"Oh come on, you still think that's true?!" Copperleap finally seemed to have reached the end of his patience, his hazel eyes glinting with a fresh layer of frustration. "Not all of us are like that. Thistlebriar is a disgusting cat, and I don't have a *drop* of sympathy for him. And I know you're still upset about Sparrowlight, and I promise you, I don't think what she did to you was right at all."

Just as Acorndapple had been preparing to snap back, her voice faltered in her throat. Clamping her jaws shut, she studied him through wary eyes, the fire kindling inside her still not completely dying out.

As convinced as she was that Copperleap was a manipulator just like Sparrowlight, his words continued to ring in her ears. As much as she wanted to deny it, they felt *real*, with the wavering, raw edge of emotion clinging to his voice.

He knew she wasn't returning to ShadowClan. There was no *reason* for him to manipulate her, to try and twist her loyalty to her former clan. Was he truly just being genuine?

Acorndapple felt her shoulders hunch, and she glared miserably down at the ground, watching as a small beetle crawled through a

jungle of grasses. Internally, she was exhausted. Tired of the rollercoaster of emotions and the wavering uncertainty that weighed down her pelt like a sluggish, muddy bog. Even snapping back with her usual fire felt far too taxing.

"Why don't we start over?"

Her gaze lifted up in surprise. Copperleap's voice was surprisingly calm, and the tense look that creased his expression was gradually loosening.

Acorndapple didn't answer at first, and he took this as his cue to continue.

"I know you don't trust me. In fact, you don't *have* to," he said slowly, as if picking out each individual word with care, like a medicine cat foraging through the undergrowth for a needed herb. "But I want to prove to you that I'm not a bad cat, that I wouldn't make the same mistakes as Sparrowlight."

Acorndapple silently gnawed on her tongue while he gazed at her, the hopeful look never leaving his expression.

"So? What do you think?"

She didn't want to jump to answers, and she certainly wasn't ready to let her guard down. But the tension in the air was knotting, growing tight around her throat, and the heaviness of exhaustion clinging to her eyes was only growing stronger and stronger.

"Fine," she sighed.

She wasn't sure if she ever could bring herself to trust him. But perhaps a fresh start was what she needed.

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Chapter Thirty-Eight

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Quarter moons flitted by, the season gradually progressing as she remained in ThunderClan. Leaf-fall strengthened, the prick of Leaf-bare in the breeze growing more and more evident. As days faded and nights grew longer, a chilly wind scoured through the forest, rushing from the north. Not only did it bring a biting cold which hinted that the bleak weather was almost upon them, but it reminded Acorndapple yet again of the prospect of an upcoming battle, and the ongoing war. Although the passing of time seemed to speed up the more she grew accustomed to the clan, it felt as if everything else was a stagnant pool of water.

She was settled alone by the fresh-kill pile, ferns brushing against her back as she nibbled on a freshly-caught squirrel. The longer she stayed in ThunderClan, the more squirrels she was forced to eat. The taste wasn't exactly growing on her, to say the least. But, after just participating in a grueling dawn patrol, Acorndapple was famished. She simply couldn't bring herself to care at the moment.

Just as she was about to finish the last few bites, brown tabby fur flashed at the corner of her vision. She glanced up and immediately wrinkled her muzzle as she spotted Sparrowlight. The scarred tabby was standing at the lichen-veiled entrance of the leader's den, talking in a low murmur with Blazestar. Acorndapple narrowed her eyes.

At this point, she might as well just be *the deputy! I can't even remember the last time Blazestar spoke about important matters with Thistlebriar.*

It wasn't like she cared about Thistlebriar. In fact, after what she'd discovered about the strange tom recently, she'd gladly choose Sparrowlight over him as deputy, if given the choice. But, realistically, she'd choose *neither of them*.

The other thing that muddled her was what could *possibly* be so

important that the two of them were constantly speaking in a very serious manner. Sure, the war with ShadowClan was going on, and ThunderClan was still allied with WindClan. But no attacks had been made in *moons*.

On the other hand, Acorndapple was still convinced Lakestar would choose battle to stop ThunderClan from claiming land. Never, in a million moons, could she imagine the young leader backing down from a fight. Unless, of course, Goldpelt was involved, but even then, she doubted he could do much to change her mind.

"Hey, Acorndapple!"

Her gaze, which had shifted back down to her almost finished meal, jerked up in surprise. Blazestar's attention was now completely focused on her, while Sparrowlight stared at her with sharp brown eyes. She decided to ignore the prying she-cat's gaze, instead pricking her ears at Blazestar.

He jerked his head towards his den before turning and padding inside. Sparrowlight quickly followed at his heel, her striped tail whipping around the corner.

Acorndapple held back a sigh. *Great, what do they want?*

She had successfully avoided Sparrowlight during her time in ThunderClan, ignoring the jabbing looks and sly grins she often sent her. Today was clearly going to be the end of that.

The mottled she-cat rose to her paws sullenly, scraping dirt over her meal before trudging to the den. She paused at the entrance, readying herself with a deep breath, before slipping inside.

"Acorndapple, welcome in," Blazestar said politely. The ginger tom was settled in his nest, his large and straight form cutting a shadow across the den wall.

She didn't miss the glint that flashed in his yellow eyes. Although the ThunderClan leader had always been polite and hospitable, she knew it was because he wanted to pry as much information about ShadowClan out of her.

"Sit, sit," he said, waving his tail towards the sandy stretch of den floor in front of him. "I hate to pull you from your evening supper, but a few important matters have come to my attention. I was hoping to..."

Acorndapple plopped down a good distance from Sparrowlight, being sure to shoot her a look from narrowed eyes. In response, she cast her a toothy grin, jagged fangs glinting in the orange-yellow light streaming through the entrance.

"...And since we're sending a patrol in less than two moons to claim a portion of their land, it would be quite beneficial to know some of their fighting techniques. There's a fifty-fifty chance Lakestar will decide to ambush us," Blazestar meowed, while Acorndapple quickly re-focused her attention on his words.

"So you just want to know some of their battle moves?" Acorndapple echoed.

"Yes, basically, and what they would normally do if they ambushed someone," Sparrowlight confirmed in a matter-of-fact tone, cutting off Blazestar just as he opened his mouth to respond.

The fur on her shoulders rippled involuntarily, and it took every ounce of her strength not to snap, *'I wasn't asking you!'*

She decided to ignore Sparrowlight and instead glanced over at Blazestar, waiting for him to respond. However, he gave a slight nod, as if agreeing with Sparrowlight.

So he's just letting her take over?! She's not even the deputy! Her tail-tip flicked back and forth as she suppressed a huff of exasperation.

It felt pointless to talk about ShadowClan's fighting techniques when no one was certain if there was actually going to be a final battle. Regardless, Acorndapple had already agreed to give any useful information about ShadowClan to Blazestar, so she went along grudgingly.

"Because there's not a lot of undergrowth in the territory, we use the time of day to our advantage," said Acorndapple, her voice

turning bland as she began to drone on. "When it's darker out, we use the shadows to be stealthy..."

As she spoke, a hint of guilt wormed its way through her stomach. She tried to push it away, telling herself that they'd chosen to believe a rogue over someone who had lived in the clan since birth. But no matter how hard she tried, it was there, and it only grew stronger and stronger.

Lakestar never actually exiled me; I basically left on my own. Maybe I never should've done that...

Acorndapple quickly shook off the thought, almost physically shuddering. She had left for a good reason; there was no *way* she could regret that decision, especially now. Plus, at the rate things had been going, Lakestar most likely would've exiled her anyway.

"So you think it's more useful if we send out the patrol in broad daylight, like during sun-high instead of earlier in the day, or even at night?" Asked Blazestar once she finished speaking, leaning over slightly.

"Yes," Sparrowlight answered, before Acorndapple had a chance to speak.

She stared down at her paws, holding back a sigh as her mind slipped away from the present. As the days wore on, she found it gradually getting more and more difficult to shove the thoughts of her former clan to the back of her head.

Eventually, Acorndapple was dismissed. She padded to the warrior's den, her tail flicking subtly as thoughts rang through her mind. She passed by several cats on her way to the den: Ferncurl and Swallowflight, who were chatting and enjoying a meal together while both their litters romped around nearby. Acorndapple barely caught herself from tripping on one of Ferncurl's kits, Emberkit, who had stumbled right into her path while playfighting with Honeykit. Upon seeing Acorndapple towering above her, she released a squeak of terror, scurrying towards her mother, while Ferncurl shot the mottled warrior a sharp glance. Acorndapple hurried her pace.

Her shoulders sank with relief upon seeing that the warrior's den was barren of any other cats, as the majority were in the clearing, finishing their evening meals and sharing tongues.

As soon as she reached her nest, she collapsed in the bracken-woven bedding, hardly bothering to get comfortable. Her stomach was a confusing knot, intertwined with fleeting anger about Sparrowlight, guilt regarding her former clan, and a sense of despair about her lack of certainty where she truly belonged. It was all too much. As it settled on her full force, she let her eyes drift shut, eventually feeling her mind slip away from the present world and into the dreamlands.

Everything was chaos.

The ground shook as paws thundered against the blood-stained dirt, bared fangs reflecting the silvery light. Caterwauls split the frost-bitten air, droplets of crimson flying as claws sliced into skin. Every wound inflicted was without mercy.

He backed himself into the barrier of holly bushes, staring wide-eyed at the fray. The exhaustion from sprinting through the forest moments ago had completely vanished as he took in the scene around him, slowly growing frozen with terror.

"Stay by me! Don't lose sight of me, not even for a second!" Pinefrost, his mentor, hissed, her cobalt eyes flashing.

Russetpaw gave a quick nod, flattening his ears to drown out the yowls of pain rising over the fray. His gaze, never leaving the swarm of warriors slashing ferociously at each other, wasn't prepared for a body to come crashing into him. A moment later, his vision was obscured by a mass of bloodstained fur.

His eyes watered as claws sank into his shoulders, heavy paws crushing his body and pummeling him into the ground. He was unable to see the face of his attacker as his muzzle was shoved completely in the dirt, but the heavy smell of ThunderClan wreathing around him told him enough.

A few heartbeats later, the weight completely vanished. Sighing in relief, he rose to his paws, wincing at the fresh bruises along his pelt.

Pinefrost was wrestling a smaller tom into the ground, tearing out chunks of fur. The tom shrieked, shoving a hefty kick directly into her stomach. She released a gasp of pain, but her eyes were hardened, forcing herself to stay latched on as she sank her teeth into his ear.

Blood pooled out of her jaws, staining her fangs scarlet. Russetpaw continued to stay crouched on the ground a few tail-lengths away. It was only his first day as an apprentice, and he had neither the confidence nor the skills to aid his mentor. So instead he continued to watch, holding his breath.

The tom yowled in pain as Pinefrost shredded his ear, tearing the delicate skin into ribbons. Once he had grown limp, eyes glazed with pain, she released him. She allowed the tom to scramble to his paws, turning and racing for the holly-woven entrance. Pinefrost gave him one final swat onto an already bleeding wound.

Once she was certain the tom had retreated, Pinefrost hurried over to Russetpaw, briefly checking him over for any wounds.

"Looks like your shoulders are a bit scratched up, but you'll be fine," said his mentor. "Stay by me."

And with that, Pinefrost whisked away into the throng, Russetpaw pressing close to her heel.

As he followed his mentor deeper into the fight, blood coated his paws. He lifted a paw off the frosty ground, shuddering as he quickly attempted to clean some off. Around him, warriors slashed and wrestled with each other, snarls and growls filling the air. He flinched as a large ShadowClan tom, Mulberryfoot, crashed on the ground next to him. He groaned weakly, shutting his eyes.

Russetpaw shivered, hurrying to catch up with Pinefrost. The tawny she-cat was eyeing the battle carefully as she wove through it, clearly searching for a fight she could aid in.

"Mulberryfoot looks like he needs help," Russetpaw meowed, tapping his tail on her shoulder to alert her.

She quickly glanced over at the tom, her eyes darkening with worry. That was when he noticed a large, gaping wound stretched across his side, along with a deep slash sliced diagonally on his forehead.

"Don't get too close to anyone fighting. Follow me," Pinefrost told him, padding in a hurried pace towards Mulberryfoot.

As they stood over the cream-colored warrior, Pinefrost glanced worriedly at his injuries. The largest one on his flank was bleeding profusely, and his mentor had to quickly press her paws against it.

"We'll have to get him out of the fighting. His wounds are too severe," she declared after a moment, glancing around the camp.

"But how? There's fighting everywhere," Russetpaw asked anxiously, jumping as a cat almost completely crashed into him.

"Help me, we'll find somewhere to put him," Pinefrost muttered before sinking her teeth into his scruff, dragging him forward with a tense face. Russetpaw quickly came to her aid, grabbing the other half of his scruff.

Mulberryfoot's eyes stayed sealed shut as they inched him slowly towards the ring of bushes at the edge of camp. At times, Russetpaw wondered if the warrior was even *alive*, due to how still he was. However, the subtle rise and fall of his flank revealed that there was at least some life left, even if he was barely clinging on.

Finally, they heaved him the last few tail-lengths, sighing in relief as they released the large warrior. Russetpaw tried to avoid glancing at the gash stretched across his side, as every time his eyes would stray over the wound, his stomach would make a sickening jolt.

"Russetpaw, I need you to stay here. With him," said Pinefrost while catching her breath, nodding down at Mulberryfoot's body.

"You're leaving me?" His eyes flitted across the battle anxiously

before glancing back at his mentor. A trail of blood was running down her forehead, dripping into her eye. However, she barely gave notice, continuing to meet her fearful apprentice's stare with a serious expression.

"Yes, but only for a moment. I need to find Frozenfeather," Pinefrost meowed firmly. "I promise I'll be back. Hide in the bushes. Keep an eye on him."

And, with that, Pinefrost spun around and raced off into the throng.

Russetpaw crept under the shelter of a small holly bush. The blood roaring in his ears drowned out any sort of pain as the jagged leaves poked and stabbed at his pelt. He curled up between the small twigs and leaves, resting his muzzle on his paws.

Some of the anxiety that had weighed down his shoulders had lifted slightly, now that he was in the safety of the shrubbery. Mulberryfoot would be fine. Pinefrost was going to fetch help. Everyone else would be okay.

He glanced over at Mulberryfoot, where his body was half-hidden by the holly bushes. What if Frozenfeather didn't come in time?

He shook off the thought. Any second now, Pinefrost would appear with the medicine cat in tow.

He peered through a gap in the leaves, his heart quickening at the sight before him. Some of the fighting had ceased as cats were growing weary with exhaustion. However, parts of the battle were still raging, and he noticed that several cats were growing closer to his hiding spot, unaware of the hidden Russetpaw as they slashed mercilessly at each other.

One cat he recognized was the deputy, Kestrelfire. He was circling a tall ginger-and-white tom, his muzzle curled into a snarl.

The rival warrior began first. He lunged forward, claws outstretched. However, Kestrelfire was clearly prepared for the attack, striking a large paw towards his face and delivering a powerful blow. Stunned, he crashed to the ground, while the deputy

rushed forward and threw his weight onto the tom.

The ginger warrior met him with flashing claws and fangs, bringing the two into a tumble. He snapped at Kestrelfire's face, sending a flurry of blows with his unsheathed paws, while Kestrelfire dug his claws into his chest, droplets of blood seeping into the ground.

The ThunderClan warrior yowled in pain, while Kestrelfire slammed his hind legs into the ground, halting the roll. As he stood over the cat, claws glinting as he prepared to strike for his throat, the ginger warrior quickly slipped out beneath him, leaping to his paws and twisting around. His chest was heaving as scarlet dripped down a multitude of wounds, while his eyes were wild with fury.

It was evident that the deputy would not finish the fight until the opposing warrior was fleeing camp with his tail between his legs.

The ginger warrior barely had a chance to regain his breath as Kestrelfire darted forward. The tom quickly rose on his hind legs to meet him, using his forelegs to force him backwards. However, Kestrelfire swiped out one of his paws, unbalancing the tom with a hefty blow to the leg.

He stumbled, falling backwards. Kestrelfire was upon him, battering and ripping his now exposed belly in such a gruesome manner that Russetpaw had to look away.

Only a few heartbeats later, he forced himself to glance back. The ginger warrior was lying on the ground, a pool of blood surrounding him. Only when the tom was completely still did Kestrelfire finally step off. Russetpaw watched with frozen horror: the tom was clearly dead, his eyes staring unmovingly into nothingness.

Kestrelfire scraped some dirt up with his bloodied claws, flinging it over the body. Then, he padded away, shaking out his pelt.

Russetpaw was now shivering, his long pelt bristling. His pawpads felt numb, as if they had frozen over. He never thought the deputy could be capable of killing a warrior in such a brutal manner. And he'd done it while hardly blinking an eye.

He wrapped his tail around his body, wishing desperately for Pinefrost to return.

A body suddenly darted into view. His ears pricked with hope, searching if the pelt was his mentor. His whiskers drooped upon seeing that it was not, in fact, Pinefrost: instead, a dark gray tabby was standing over the body of the fallen warrior, his eyes growing wide with horror.

"No... no... Thistlespring!" The tom screwed his eyes shut with grief, pressing his muzzle against the body of the fallen warrior. Russetpaw watched, stomach twisting, as the gray tabby suddenly jumped to his paws, eyes narrowing with fury. The tom turned towards the fray, bristling out his fur, before lunging into the battle. Russetpaw's stomach lurched fearfully as he spotted the tom's target: his father, Elmjaw. The two warriors fell under the sea of fighting cats, vanishing out of Russetpaw's line of vision.

Russetpaw shut his eyes tightly and pressed his claws into the dirt, whispering a prayer to StarClan. But he quickly opened them when the pounding of pawsteps rang in his ears. Relief crashed over like a wave when he discovered that it was Pinefrost, with the medicine cat Frozenfeather at her heel.

Russetpaw slipped outside of the shelter, hurrying over to Pinefrost. Her cobalt eyes practically swelled with relief upon seeing that the apprentice was unharmed, but nosed him over anyway to check for injuries. Seeing that he was unscathed, she stepped back and glanced at Frozenfeather.

"He's in that bush; we'll have to drag him out," meowed the she-cat in her gruff voice. Then, to Russetpaw, she asked, "Is he still alright?"

"Yes," he said quietly, a slight tremor apparent in his voice.

Once the two she-cats dragged the limp tom free of the thicket, Russetpaw noticed that the fighting around them was beginning to cease. Suddenly, a large black she-cat rose to her hind legs, her powerful silhouette rising over the clashing warriors. A loud caterwaul rose from her gaping jaws.

"ThunderClan! Retreat!" The she-cat yowled before dropping back to the ground. As soon as the words left her jaws, ThunderClan cats began scrabbling for an escape route. Some quickly grabbed their dead clanmates before dragging them to the exit.

As Frozenfeather was treating Mulberryfoot's wounds, Pinefrost padded over to him, standing still as the two of them watched the ordeal in camp. His ears flattened as he noticed that limp bodies scattered around the camp were growing more visible. The once pristine white snow he had witnessed before leaving camp that morning was now stained a deep maroon red. And, the ShadowClan cats left standing around the clearing all had deep gashes across their pelts, blood dripping rapidly down their fur.

His eyes roved desperately around camp, searching for familiar faces.

"I have to find Elmjaw and Myrtlepool," he said to Pinefrost, flicking his tail-tip anxiously.

"I'll help you," she murmured, resting her tail across his back. The two of them quickly set off.

The last time he'd seen Elmjaw was when the ThunderClan warrior had attacked him. His mother, on the other hand... Russetpaw hadn't seen her since the morning before the battle.

Russetpaw was briefly aware of Hemlockstar gathering up his remaining warriors, sending them to Lilacpond, the younger medicine cat. However, none of the pelts clustered around Hemlockstar was that of Elmjaw or Mrytlepool, which only caused his fear to intensify.

"Russetpaw. Come here."

His head immediately jerked in Pinefrost's direction. She had peeled off and was standing a few fox-lengths away, her ears flattened as she stood over the body of a dark ginger tom. His throat closed up as he recognized Elmjaw's body, quickly racing over to his mentor.

Elmjaw's eyes were glazed as he stared up at the sky, the once

bright amber now as still and dull as could be. A whimper escaped his jaws as he spotted a large gash marring his windpipe, scarlet seeping through his pelt.

"Oh, Russetpaw, I'm sorry," Pinefrost whispered, curling her tail around him comfortingly. He could only stand frozen, unmoving, as everything settled on him full-force. Rage and sorrow crept through him as he sank to the ground, pressing his muzzle against Elmjaw's lifeless body.

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Author's Note

I won't be able to publish any chapters for the next few months, so I decided to get chapters 37 and 38 out of the way! Hope you enjoyed :)